

The Power of Positive Thinking

Matthew 7:7-11

You may have wondered about my sermon title this afternoon, wondering if I had given myself over to the message and theology of Norman Vincent Peale. The power of positive thinking was the title of his most famous book, which was published in the 1950s and has sold over 5 million copies, spending 186 weeks on the New York Times bestsellers list.

Peale applied Christianity to everyday problems and is often acknowledged as the person who is most responsible for bringing psychology into the professing Church, blending its principles into a message of 'positive thinking.' Peale said, "through prayer you ... make use of the great factor within yourself, the deep subconscious mind ... [which Jesus called] the kingdom of God within you ... Positive thinking is just another term for faith." He also wrote, "Your unconscious mind ... [has a] power that turns wishes into realities when the wishes are strong enough."

Just think about those words. Power, in the thoughts of your mind. Power to bring about what you wish, within yourself. So wish strong enough and the wish will become true. Yet as foolish as I hope that idea seems to you, I suspect many who believe such nonsense would still turn to our text this afternoon in order to defend their position. "Ask, and it will be given to you." That seems pretty consistent with Norman Vincent Peale. "Seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." As long as the seeking and knocking is strong enough!

The power of positive thinking. Right? Wrong. Please don't let this marvelous promise of God be turned into a damnable heresy in which the power of God is replaced by the power of a man. Don't let this encouraging promise which Jesus gives to his

beloved disciples be turned into an error from hell that will cause people to turn away from Jesus.

Peale honestly and sincerely wished to help those who suffered from an inferiority complex, but sadly his solution ended up to be far worse than the problem. For you can go to heaven if you have had an inferiority complex, but you won't go to heaven if you really believe what Norman Vincent Peale has taught. For there is no power in your thoughts. There is no force in you which is able to bring about the desires of your heart, there is no ability within you to bring about the things that you long for. And the real problem in that system is this, it all comes down to you, your actions, your works. And so when you don't get what you want, it must be because you did something wrong. When you don't get what have asked in prayer, it must be because you didn't ask properly, or ask enough. It's your fault.

You see, the real failure of the "power of positive thinking" is the reality of life, when positive thinking itself fails. Consider one of Norman Vincent Peale's most prominent and well known followers, Robert Schuller, who so popularized the secular concept of self-esteem for people within the church. Schuller calls Peale "the man who has impacted and influenced my thinking and my theology and my life more than any other living person." And yet, Schuller's architecturally magnificent Crystal Cathedral was dedicated in 1980, only to be sold in bankruptcy court 30 years later to the local Catholic diocese. That amazing structure boasted 10,661 silver-tinted windows supported by a filigree of steel. The windows shimmered in the light that sun-filled day. The Crystal Cathedral, Schuller said when it was opened, was to be 'a monument to mountain-moving faith,' a 'star-shaped sanctuary sparkling in the sun' which would stand for centuries to come." It lasted only 30 years, and the ministry Schuller established based on the power of positive thinking

collapsed as well. He himself died of cancer just a few years later.

So how do we unpack all of those things? How do we sort all of this out, so that the gloriously encouraging promise of our Lord Jesus remains a glorious encouragement in the goodness of the grace of God at work in our lives? How do we interpret and understand this text so as to avoid the error of such grave dangers, in order to regain the encouragement Jesus so clearly intends for his disciples?

First, by emphasizing what Jesus does actually say. And he does exhort his disciples to pray. To ask. To seek. And to knock. It is,

I. A THREEFOLD EXHORTATION.

v.7

It is often true, as James puts it,
James 4:2 “You do not have, because you do not ask.”

It is the reality of our lives that we are prone to be lazy in prayer, we can be limited or small-minded when we pray. We forget what Paul writes so eloquently as a benediction to the church in Ephesus,

Eph. 3:20 “Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, 21 to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.”

God can do immeasurably more than you can even imagine. So ask! That’s easy, isn’t it? And I want that exhortation to be easily understood. Ask. “You do not have, because you do not ask.” But think about it, asking requires humility. And I think that is often why we don’t ask.

A. The humility of asking.

We prefer to think of ourselves as self-sufficient. Self-reliant. Whereas asking requires humility. We laugh at the typical man, don’t we, when he is lost, without a GPS. So often, a man simply will not stop and ask for directions. All laughing aside, a good bit of that might simple be called pride.

And there are far more serious implications of that fallen human tendency toward self-reliance. In the spiritual realm, there are disastrous consequences. We simply do not ask.

So when you pray, you ought to become like little children. Children just ask. There is no pretense, until some adult teaches them. No smug expressions of self-importance. No, children just ask. And Jesus says to us, ask. Then he says, “Seek.” So beyond the humility of asking, we have,

B. The earnest pursuit of seeking.

As one commentator puts it, “Seeking is asking plus acting. It implies earnest petitioning, but that alone is not sufficient. A person must be active in endeavoring to obtain the fulfillment of his needs.”

So don’t just ask, seek. Pursue it. And persevere. In other words, knock. “Knocking is asking plus acting plus persevering. One knocks again and again until the door is opened.” So we have the humility of asking, the earnest pursuit of seeking, and,

C. The active perseverance of knocking.

So that is our responsibility. And the instructions which we are given for prayer are very clear. Ask, seek, knock. With this illustration,

Luke 18:1 “Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart, 2 saying: “There was in a

certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man. 3 Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him, saying, 'Get justice for me from my adversary.' 4 And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, 'Though I do not fear God nor regard man, 5 yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.' ” 6 Then the Lord said, “Hear what the unjust judge said. 7 And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? 8 I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?”

So this is the encouragement, that you pray without losing heart, that you continue to pray. The judge gives the woman what she wants “because this widow troubles me.” She continually bothers me! The judge gives the widow woman what she wants so that she will not wear him out. That’s the illustration of how you and I should pray.

But not because the power is within you, not at all. Pray this way, ask, seek and knock, because there is power with God. And if you think about it, how you pray and what you pray for really do indicate how powerful you believe God to be. Ask, seek, and knock, with this encouragement.

II. A MARVELOUS PROMISE.

“It will be given to you...” “You will find...” And, “it will be opened to you.” God does answer our prayers. It is, what I call,

A. The reward of faith.

He does reward your faith. He does give in response to your faith. He does answer in relation to your faith.

Now, faith is not power. The power of positive thinking is not

another name for faith. Rather, faith is believing God’s word to be true. Faith is trusting God to do what he promises, trusting God rather than trusting in yourself. Faith is relying upon God because you yourself are weak and actually helpless. God has all the power.

The humility of asking is that you have to admit your need, your weakness. And God rewards that faith by giving you what you ask. God rewards your faith by opening the door that was closed to you.

This is not the message of “name it and claim it.” As it is often labeled today, this is not a defense of the so-called “positive confession movement.” This is not a so-called “word of faith” doctrine. All those movements essentially bind God to do whatever you command him, that God is obligated to obey or fulfill your requests, assuming that you utter to proper formula. God is removed from being the sovereign Lord of all creation, and becomes a pawn to be manipulated. The truth, however, is that the power is not in your words, your positive confession. The reward, rather, is in the blessing of God, in response to your faith.

And he does reward your faith! That’s the encouragement. God responds to your requests. God answers your prayer.

Mat. 21:21 “So Jesus answered and said to them, “Assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but also if you say to this mountain, ‘Be removed and be cast into the sea,’ it will be done. 22 And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.”

Dear friends, there is great encouragement here! Great encouragement to pray. Great confidence to pray. Don’t let any of the concerns I have raised tonight dull that encouragement.

v.7 “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.”

Actually, it is even better than that, if you think that God will give you what you ask. Because the fullness of the promise is that God will give you what is good!

B. Giving what is good.

Not just a positive confession. Not just a word of faith. No, God answers prayer according to his own will, and his will is always to do good! So sometimes, he answers your prayer by saying “no.” Sometimes, that “no” means that what you ask is not, actually good. So God does not give you what you ask because he determines, instead, to give what is good.

Look at the end of,

v.11 “... how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him.”

Interestingly, in the parallel passage, we read this,

Luke 11:13 “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!”

So what is promised is nothing less than the Holy Spirit. The good gifts which God gives in answer to your prayer is ascribed to the Holy Spirit himself. God does give what is good!

Martyn Lloyd-Jones says it so characteristically well, “I thank God that He is not prepared to do anything that I may chance to ask Him, and I say that as the result of my own past experience... I am profoundly grateful to God that He did not grant me certain

things for which I asked, and that He shut certain doors in my face... God is not going to grant me every desire and request. God has a much better way for us.”

In other words, some things we ask for are not good! And God always does what is good. Sometimes, however, God withholds what we ask, so that we might learn from God what Paul expresses in,

2 Cor. 12:9 “And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

So there are many reasons for what you might describe as God not answering your prayers. But you can be assured, that what he does is good. And, therefore, he actually always answers your prayer. And Jesus gives his disciples the context for this marvelous promise, namely, a definition of,

III. A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP.

There is a reason why you can be sure that God will answer your prayers with what is good, and that is his relationship to you, the relationship of a father. So Jesus uses a very intimate illustration that identifies,

A. The affection of a father.

The point is easy to understand, isn’t it? Jesus appeals to the natural affections of any human father,

v.9-10

Of course not! You who love your children, of course you will do them good! Of course you will give them what is good, and

avoid giving them what is harmful. And as you argue from the lesser to the greater, if you will give your children what is good, how much more so God! So the foundation of this whole passage is,

B. The goodness of our God.

It's not enough to proclaim and to believe that God is sovereign, and powerful. There is more. He can do anything, nothing is too difficult for him, and he accomplishes whatever he chooses to accomplish. But the God of power is also a God of goodness.

So it is not simply that God is your father, but that as a father, he is good and does good to you! And that is where all the encouragement in prayer comes from. I propose to you that this is a crucial doctrine to fully grasp, that God is good! Peter puts it this way,

1 Peter 2:1 "Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, 2 as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, 3 if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious."

That word could well be translated "good." No doubt, Peter is quoting,

Psalms 34:8 "Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good; Blessed is the man who trusts in Him! 9 Oh, fear the LORD, you His saints! There is no want to those who fear Him. 10 The young lions lack and suffer hunger; But those who seek the LORD shall not lack any good thing."

Similarly,

Psalms 84:11 "For the LORD God is a sun and shield; The LORD will give grace and glory; No good thing will He withhold From those who walk uprightly."

Blessed are you, people of God, for God is good! And blessed are you because God does what is good. This is what we know,

Rom. 8:28 "...that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."

Dear friends, let this be your great encouragement as you pray. God is good. In every way, in every circumstance. On every occasion, he is good. And does good. Knowing that, believing that, being assured of that, let this encouragement be yours as you pray,

v.7 "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened."