

## Prayer and the Goodness of God

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Matthew 7:7-11

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Let's turn our attention to our text for this morning. Let me encourage you to stand, if you have the ability. Matthew, recording Jesus' teaching, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, pens the following words:

*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. 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? 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! Matthew 7:7-11*

Brothers and sisters, the grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever (Isaiah 40:8).

### **I. GOD PROMISES TO ANSWER HIS CHILDREN'S PRAYERS (v.7-8)**

*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.*

When you pause to consider that God is infinitely strong and can do all that He pleases, and that He is infinitely righteous so that He only does what is right, and that He is infinitely good so that everything He does is perfectly good, and that He is infinitely wise so that He always knows perfectly what is right and good, and that He is infinitely loving so that in all His strength and righteousness and goodness and wisdom He raises the eternal joy of His loved ones as high as it can be raised — when you pause to consider this, then the lavish invitations of this God to ask Him for good things, with the promise that he will give them, is unimaginably wonderful.<sup>1</sup>

This is the second time in the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus addresses the issue of prayer. It's safe to say when Jesus repeats himself or expounds upon a particular subject – we would do well to listen attentively. If you can remember back to Matthew 6:9-13, Jesus gave us a model prayer. He begins His teaching with the reminder of His sovereignty – “your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.” Having said that, pray like this, “Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your

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<sup>1</sup> John Piper, *Ask Your Father in Heaven - Matthew 7:7-12*, December 31, 2006.

name. Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." In chapter 6, Jesus teaches His disciples how to pray. Now, in the text before us this morning, Jesus assures us that God not only welcomes prayer, but He also answers prayer. Thus, we are encouraged to come to Him continuously and confidently.

## **A. Ask biblically.**

### **With the right posture:**

We are to approach God with a posture of humility and faith. We aren't to come *demanding* or *doubting*. James reminds us, "But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways" James 1:6-8.

### **For the right things:**

It's important to note these verses aren't a blank check for whatever we might want. They must be interpreted within the immediate context of the Sermon on the Mount and the broader context of the rest of the Bible's teaching on prayer. Remember, a text without a context is a pretext. Isolating these verses from their setting in the Sermon on the Mount is deadly. Therefore, what seems like unqualified promises here are actually restricted by the rest of the Bible.

John reminds us, "This is the confidence that we have toward 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 that we have asked of him" 1 John 5:14-15.

For these things (cf. Beatitudes) Jesus tells us to ask, seek, and knock! There is an intentional ascending order to Jesus' teaching on prayer.

1. Asking implies asking for a conscious need. It also suggests humility in asking, as the word used is commonly used of asking a superior.
2. Seeking involves asking, but adds action. The idea is not merely to express one's need, but to get up and look around for help. It involves effort.
3. Knocking includes asking, plus acting, plus persevering - like someone who keeps pounding on a closed door!

## B. Ask persistently.

It's important we know that Jesus isn't making a suggestion when He calls us to "ask," "seek," and "knock". Each of these three verbs are imperatives in the original language – in other words, they're *commands* not suggestions. But in the Greek, there are two types of imperatives – aorist imperatives and present imperatives. An aorist imperative communicates a simple, but direct command such as "stop at stop signs" or "pay your bills". The present tense imperative, on the other hand, communicates not only a definite command, but a continuous action such as "keep on stopping at stop signs" and keep on paying your bills". The language Jesus uses here in verse 7 is very intentional. His use of the present tense imperative indicates that we are not only to "ask," "seek," and "knock," but we are to "keep on asking God," "keep on seeking His will," and "keep on knocking at the throne room door".

Prayer requires stamina, perseverance, determination, stick-to-itiveness, steadfastness, diligence, and tenacity. It is those who keep on asking that receive and those who keep on seeking that find. God opens the door to those who keep on knocking. In Luke's Gospel, just before the same call to prayer appears, Jesus illustrates persistence with a short story. He said to His disciples, "Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; and he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything'? I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his [persistence] he will rise and give him whatever he needs" Luke 11:5-8.

Why do some prayers seem to be answered immediately while others seem to go long periods of time before there is a clear answer? I'm not sovereign and so I find it of little avail to speculate. But this much is certain, if we keep on asking God, keep on seeking His will, and keep on knocking at the throne room door, sooner or later the door will be opened to us. Jesus gave it to us in writing! Friends, divine delays do not indicate reluctance on God's part. It may very well be that God wants to use the time of waiting to help us learn patience. God will sometimes put the intensity of our desires to the test to cause us to look more like Jesus. God, through Jeremiah, told the exiles in Babylon, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart" Jeremiah 29:13. Remember, it's those who "hunger and thirst for righteousness" that are satisfied (cf. Matthew 5:6).

Do you pray persistently? There are many reasons we often fail in the area of persistent prayer, but let me quickly mention a few:

1. We think it doesn't matter (fatalism).
2. We are fearful we won't pray in the "right" way or say the "right" words (mysticism).
3. We think we can do on our own what only God can do in and through us (narcissism).

Many of you are well acquainted with these words:

*What a friend we have in Jesus,      Oh what peace we often forfeit,  
All our sins and grief's to bear.      oh what needless pain we bear.  
What a privilege to carry,      All because we do not carry,  
Everything to God in prayer.      everything to God in prayer.<sup>2</sup>*

James tells us, "You do not have, because you do not ask" James 4:2. God is more eager to answer our prayers than we are to even pray.

### **C. Ask confidently.**

Let me again remind you of 1 John 5:14-15. John writes, "This is the *confidence* that we have toward 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 that we have asked of him." The writer of Hebrews said it this way, "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" Hebrews 4:16. If you survey the text, God makes seven confidence-stirring promises to His children when they pray. Let me direct your attention to God's treasure chest of prayer.

1. Ask, and *it will be given to you...* (v.7)
2. Seek, and *you will find...* (v.7)
3. Knock, and *it will be opened to you.* (v.7)
4. For everyone who asks *receives...* (v.8)
5. And the one who seeks *finds...* (v.8)
6. And to the one who knocks *it will be opened.* (v.8)
7. How much more will your Father who is in Heaven *give good things* to those who ask Him! (v.11)

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph M. Scriven, *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*, 1819-1886.

## II. GOD IS AN INFINITELY GOOD FATHER (v.9-11)

*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? 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!*

### JESUS ARGUES FROM LESSER TO GREATER

Why should we persist in continual and confident prayer? Jesus gives us the answer. Because God is an infinitely good Father and, according to verse 11, He delights in giving good gifts to His children (cf. James 1:17). Jesus makes this argument by use of a colorful analogy. He compares a human father, who though he is fallen and sinful, still desires to bless his children to Himself, a perfect, sinless, Heavenly Father.

No decent father would give his son a stone instead of a round loaf of bread (which looked like a stone), or a snake instead of a similar-appearing fish (eel). If an earthly father, with his sinful (evil) nature, delights to do right materially for his children, it makes sense that the righteous, Heavenly Father will much more reward His children spiritually for their persistence.

#### A. Sometimes it may seem as if God gives us a stone instead of bread.

Sometimes it may seem as if the Lord has given us a “stone” instead of “bread.” But in His wisdom, He actually is working through our circumstances to give us something far better than what we requested. I think about Paul who prayed persistently, three times, that the Lord would take away the thorn that was gouging his side. Paul writes, “Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

In other words, the thorn, though it seems like a stone, is actually bread. When Paul realized this he responded, “[Then] I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong” 2 Corinthians 12:8-10.

Sometimes it may seem as if God gives us a stone instead of bread, but you can rest assured that is never the case. An unknown author expressed it this way:

I asked for health that I might do greater things;  
I was given infirmity that I might do better things.  
I asked God for strength that I might achieve;  
I was made weak that I might learn to obey.  
I asked for riches that I might be happy;  
I was given poverty that I might be wise.

I asked for power and the praise of men;  
I was given weakness to sense my need of God.  
I asked for all things that I might enjoy life;  
I was given life that I might enjoy all things.  
I got nothing I asked for but everything I hoped for;  
In spite of myself, my prayers were answered—  
I am among all men most richly blessed.  
Yes, God always gives what is for us - best.<sup>3</sup>

## **B. God knows how to give far better than we know how to ask.**

Spurgeon once said, “Our heavenly Father will correct our prayer, and give us, not what we ignorantly seek, but what we really need. Our prayers go to heaven in a Revised Version. It would be a terrible thing if God always gave us all we asked for. Our heavenly Father himself ‘knows how to give’ far better than we know how to ask”.

In Romans 8:26-27 Paul reminds us, “The Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”

This is our great confidence in prayer. We may be sure that no good thing will be withheld from God’s children; but we may also be sure God loves us too well to give anything that would hurt us. This leads to my final thought this morning.

## **C. When God says “No,” it is because He wants to give what is better.**

As sinful and flawed as we are because of the Fall, fathers desire to help, bless, and give good gifts to their children. If your son or daughter, in ignorance, asked for a stone or a snake, would you give it to them? No. Would it alter your decision if they begged for it? No. What if they came pleading, “Father, I must have the snake; I can’t live without the snake.” The answer is still the same. Ask all you want, beg all you want, plead all you want, the answer is still, “no”. Children often ask for foolish things (some of us never grow out of asking for foolish things). Children would try and sustain themselves with sugar if we let them. Children would play with dangerous objects and in dangerous places if we let them. They would run with scissors, provoke a wasp, play with fire, climb too high, get too close, and stay too late. But the goodness of a Father knows better. Friends, we often do the same. We beg and plead for things that to us seem like bread, but God knows it’s a poisonous snake. When God says “no,” it’s not because He doesn’t care for you. Rather, it’s because He is good, He loves you so, and He knows what is

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<sup>3</sup> Richard DeHaan, *A Stone or Bread*, July 30, 2003.

best for us, even though we often, in ignorance or immaturity, ask for things that would be hurtful. When God says “no,” it’s because there is a better “yes”.

The theologian Garth Brooks reminds us, “Some of God’s greatest gifts are unanswered prayer.” At least unanswered in the form of the original request. Spurgeon once said, “God will substitute the blessing we would crave if we knew as much as He does of the heart of man. What a comfort it is to know that God gives only good things. What He withholds is good; what He gives is good; what He substitutes in His answer to our petitions is good, nay, good is not strong enough. He always gives the best.” We can thank God that the granting of our requests is conditional not only upon our asking, seeking, and knocking, but upon sovereign wisdom as to whether what we are asking, seeking, and knocking for is actually good for us.

But how can we be sure God cares for us so deeply and will only give us what is best? Go with me to a hill outside Jerusalem, not far from the Damascus gate. Look closely at the three men who are dying on bloody Roman crosses. Study that awful scene closely. Listen to the jeering crowd. Ponder the words spoken by the man hanging in the middle. There you’ll have your answer.<sup>4</sup> The death of Jesus is the foundation and sure sign that all of God’s promises are yes and Amen. That’s why we close our prayers, “In Jesus name.” Paul reminds us, “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things” Romans 8:32. Are you asking? Are you seeking? Are you knocking? Prayer is the key that unlocks the treasure chest of God’s good gifts.

### **CLOSING BENEDICTION:**

Hear this benediction from Jude 24-25 as we bring our corporate worship to a close this morning. Jude writes, “Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever.” And all God’s people said, “Amen!” Go in peace.

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<sup>4</sup> Ray Pritchard, *Three Levels of Prayer - Matthew 7:7-11*, April 2, 2000.