To all of our campuses and those of you joining us online, welcome back to another week of *I Can Relate*. This weekend, John is actually away speaking at a conference, leading thousands of people in what it means to be a fully devoted follower of Jesus. Of all the places he gets invited to speak, this weekend he happens to be in Hawaii.

Knowing how busy John is, I talked to him a few weeks ago, and I said, "Hey, John, I would be more than happy to take this one off your plate. I mean, you're so busy. You have a congregation who needs you. John, here am I. Send me." He was adamant this was his burden to bear. He feels strongly called to a life of surfing. I mean, suffering. So John, if you're watching this, we love you, we miss you, and don't forget to apply some sunscreen.

Over the past few weeks, we've been looking at Jesus' teachings on how to relate with other people. Do not judge. Remove the plank from your own eye before you remove the speck from another person's eye. Last week we looked at Jesus' teaching on being patient and not forcing and pushing our advice on other people.

All relationships require work and effort, whether it's marriage, parenthood, even friendship. Even the relationships with our beloved pets take time and effort. I know this firsthand because my family recently adopted a dog. Every day when I come home from work, he is so excited to see me. He jumps up on me and wants to play. I just want to sit down and crash on the couch. When I don't give him the attention and the affection he craves, I just feel guilty and deflated.

Jesus doesn't want us to experience any of our relationships that way. This week, he pivots the focus of it from our relationships with others toward our relationship with himself, with God our heavenly Father. One of the primary ways we interact with God is through prayer.

According to some polls, more people will pray this week than will exercise, drive a car, or even go to work. Nine out of ten people say they pray regularly, and three out of four people claim to pray every day. If you Google the word *pray* or *prayer*, you'll get over 100 million links in less than a second. Check out this short video from Alpha on people who pray.

[Video]

**Female:** Every day.
Male: Twice a week.

Female: Yes. A lot.

Male: No, I don't.

Male: I used to, but not so much now because I have a lot of what I want now.

Female: Honestly? Well, not really to be honest with you. Not really. I don't really pray.

Female: I sort of just meditate on things.

Female: In my own way, yeah.

Female: Well, I guess only if I'm really, really scared or I really, really want something. Then I'll pray.

Male: For help and to talk with God.

Male: I hope for things. I wouldn't say I pray to anything specifically.

Male: I pray every day. I pray even when things are going good or things are going bad.

Male: I still pray even though I question a lot of it and doubt a lot of it. But I still find myself praying kind of often.

[End of video]

Now if you ask the average person about prayer, they will say it's important they pray often but that it's not very satisfying or they rarely experience the presence of God when they pray. I mean, as important as people say it is, they experience prayer more as a burden than as a delight. Maybe you're someone who struggles with prayer. If that's you, you're not alone. Listen to this prayer from a person who struggles with chronic worry.

"Dear God, help me to relax about insignificant details beginning tomorrow at 7:41 a.m., 23 seconds past the minute (Eastern Standard Time). Dear God, help me to consider people's feelings, even if most of them are hypersensitive. Dear God, help me to take responsibility for the consequences of my actions, even though they're usually not my fault. Dear God, help me to try not to run everything, but if you need some help, please feel free to ask me.

Dear God, help me be more laid back, and help me to do it exactly right. Dear God, give me patience. I mean, like right now. Dear God, help me to not be a perfectionist. Did I spell that right? Dear God, help me to finish everything I sta... Dear God, help me to keep my mind on one thing at a... Oh hey! What's up? ...one thing at a time and not get distracted. Dear God, help me to do only what I can and trust you for the rest. Would you mind putting that in writing? Dear God, help me be open to other people's ideas, even though they may be misguided. In Jesus' name I pray, amen."
You see, prayer is one of the primary ways we connect with God, and yet I personally find it frustrating and hard to do at times. One look at the headlines, and it's easy to doubt prayer even makes a difference, especially against things like nuclear threat, global warming, and mass violence. Even if it seems like prayer does make a difference, answered prayers are difficult to prove with any certainty. In C.S. Lewis' novel, *The Screwtape Letters*, a senior demon gives this advice on prayer to a young recruit:

"But you can worry him with the haunting suspicion that the practice is absurd and can have no objective result. Don't forget to use the 'heads I win, tails you lose' argument. If the thing he prays for doesn't happen, then that is one more proof that petitionary prayers don't work; if it does happen, he will, of course, be able to see some of the physical causes which led up to it, and 'therefore it would have happened anyway,' and thus a granted prayer becomes just as good a proof as a denied one that prayers are ineffective."

Then there are advances in modern science and technology that have also contributed to our lack of confidence around prayer. Back in the day, when a child got sick, the parents would cry out to God. They'd pray for healing. They'd call the pastor. Now we pick up the phone, call the doctor or call an ambulance, and get help right away.

My biggest personal challenge to a fulfilling prayer life is a lack of time, busyness. Meaningful prayer requires time...a lot of it. Where does it fit in between work, family, the gym, and grocery runs to Trader Joe's? The famous British preacher David Martyn Lloyd-Jones once said, "Of all the activities in which the Christ follower engages, and which are part of the Christian life, there is surely none which causes so much perplexity, and raises so many problems, as the activity we call prayer."

I wonder maybe if that's why in Luke, chapter 11, the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, because you know in all of the Gospels, this is the only recorded request the disciples make, the only time they asked Jesus to teach them how to do anything. Isn't that interesting? I mean, if I were following Jesus around at the time and watched him do some of the things he did, I'm not sure that's what I'd ask him to teach me. Jesus did some pretty incredible things. He was an amazing communicator. He was an incredible teacher.

I'd ask him, "Teach me how to teach like you teach. Teach me how to speak like you speak." I mean, that would be pretty handy right now. He fed thousands of people with a couple of loaves of bread and a few pieces of fish. That would be a pretty useful skill to learn from Jesus. We could address hunger and famine with that skill. "Teach me how to feed the masses."

Jesus also walked on water. I'm not sure how that could help others, but that would be a cool trick. Jesus healed people and raised people from the dead. Wouldn't you want to ask him to teach you how to do that, how to perform miracles, how to heal the hurting, how to save lives? But those aren't what they asked him. The only recorded request we have from the disciples in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John is of the disciples asking Jesus to teach them how to pray.

I think the reason this is what they wanted to learn from him is because of the kind of person Jesus was. He was the most radically loving person who ever lived. He ate with sinners and welcomed them. What he did more than anything else to live this kind of life, to be this kind of person, was he spent an awful lot of time in prayer.
In the middle of this teaching as he is leading people on how to relate well, how to love well, how to show up as your best self, Jesus tells them to pray and to go to the Father in prayer. The main purpose of prayer is not to make life easier. It's not to get God to do what you want him to do but to simply know him, have a relationship with him and, in the process, maybe even become a little more like him.

Jesus compares our relationship with God to that of a child and a parent. Many of you will be able to understand this firsthand. Even if you're not a parent, almost all people are familiar with this relationship. Jesus says in the way a child asks their parent for what they need, pray. Ask God for whatever you need, and he will give it to you. This is what Jesus said:

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"

Jesus comes right out and says, "Ask, seek, and knock." What's surprising about Jesus' statement here is how wide open it is. I mean, he says, "For everyone who asks receives." Notice he doesn't qualify that statement. Who can make the ask? Anyone. For what can they ask? He doesn't say. He just says, "Ask and it will be given to you."

Now the first thing that came to my mind when I read this was you probably have to ask the right things. You probably have to have the right heart. You probably have to have a right relationship with God. I mean, my first inclination is to qualify this statement, but Jesus doesn't say any of that here. All he says is, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."

To illustrate this, Jesus tells a story about a child who asks for a piece of bread and a piece of fish. This is a general observation. Parents want to provide for their kids. They want to give them what they need to grow, to develop, and to thrive in this world. Usually this is not a burden but a joy, something a parent loves to do for their children.

My 7-year-old son, Max, and I have been reading the Harry Potter series together. Most nights we'll jump on the couch, and we'll read a chapter before bed. I love this time with him. I love how he listens attentively, trying to guess what happens next. We have this deal where after we finish each book, we'll watch the movie for that book, and then we'll read the next one. Then when we're done with the whole series, we're taking a trip to The Wizarding World of Harry Potter at Universal Studios.

On average, the relationship between a parent and a young child is mostly one-way. I love the time Max and I spend together, but I'm the one doing most, if not all, the work. I do the reading. I rent the movie. I make the popcorn. When we're done with the whole series, I'm going to take him to Universal Studios, and I'll pay for the trip. I'll probably spend a God-awful amount of money at The Wizarding World of Harry Potter. I mean, you know what I'm talking about. Those magic wands don't come cheap.

Max just receives. He takes all this in. That's just how this works. When Max goes to bed, he doesn't set an alarm clock. He assumes I'll wake him up in the morning, I'll clean his room, I'll feed him, I'll take him where he needs to go, and that I'll pay for everything along the way. I may get an occasional, "Thanks, Dad," but otherwise he doesn't really stop to think twice about how any of this works. He assumes I exist to meet his needs, that spoiled, little brat.

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Jesus depicts God as our heavenly Father, as someone who is eager to give and meet our needs. His job is to be our heavenly Father. His job is to provide, and our job is to be his children, which means our job is to ask, pray, and receive. Jesus is describing the day-to-day life for many of us who have young kids. I mean, that's just how these relationships work.

I actually have three boys. Between them, my wife and I are constantly being asked for things. "Can we go outside? Can we play on the computer? What are we eating for dinner? Can we go to the mall? Can I borrow some money? Can you buy me this? Can I have that?" I think we're decent parents, and generally, we tend to say yes and agree to these things. But Jesus is showing us a picture of a heavenly Father who loves to give, who loves to provide, who loves to answer his children when they ask him.

Now at face value, this is pretty simple, but if we're being absolutely honest, this sounds a little naïve. I mean, going to God in prayer sounds good, and that's what most of us have been taught to do, but based on our experiences it's probably a lot more complicated than that. I mean, many of us will have experiences and challenges that make this easier said than done. If you resonate with one of these challenges, check it out.

If God, for instance, knows what I need, why do I need to pray or ask? I mean, Jesus says in Matthew 6, "…for your Father knows what you need before you ask him." If God knows what I need and has unlimited power, then why do I need to pray? I mean, either he doesn't know or he doesn't care. Therefore, prayer might just be a waste of time. If God is omniscient and knows all things, what's the point of asking for it?

The Bible continues to teach, "You do not have because you do not ask." You see, it's hard to pray when plenty of people around me have everything they need and more without praying for it. They seem to have everything without prayer, everything I have with prayer. They get what they need by working for it, not by praying.

I mean, my neighbor has a nice house, a nice car by working hard for those things, not by asking God. A mother gives birth to her child by medical skill, not by prayer. A family balances their budget by the salary of a working parent, not by prayer. Doesn't this just prove prayer doesn't make all that much of a difference?

God gives gifts to people whether they pray or not, whether they believe or not. I mean, he gives life to everyone, breath to everyone, rain to everyone. The sun rises on the good and the evil, and none of these things are dependent on whether people acknowledge God or pray. Jesus teaches us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." It's bread we're all going to receive, even if we don't ask for it, even if we don't pray for it.

Another challenge to prayer is unanswered prayer. As a pastor, I've prayed for hundreds of people. Years ago, I prayed for my Aunt Sue. She was sick with leukemia. She had gone through multiple bone marrow transplants. My whole family, my whole church, had rallied around her and prayed for her health. I wish I could tell you she was healed, but that's not how the story ended. After a long battle with cancer, she eventually succumbed to it and passed away.

I imagine when unanswered prayers like that begin to stack up, we stop believing that anyone up there is paying attention and think our prayers aren't really making a difference. We can start to think prayer is
unnecessary because God gives to a lot of people who don't ask, and it's unproductive because he fails to give to many of us who do ask.

See, this is the problem of unanswered prayer. We have to remember God's promises are not unconditional. His love is, and God is not only good. He is wise, and he knows the difference between what is good and what is not. A good parent wouldn't give a stone or a snake to their child, but what if a child did ask for a stone or a snake? A truly loving and wise parent wouldn't give that to them, would they? I mean, how much more does God know the difference between what is good and what we need? We have to thank God for answering prayers both when he gives us what we ask for and when he doesn't.

I have a friend whose dog always tries to get under the oven when she bakes. Why wouldn't he? It's warm under there. But as much as he wants to get in there, she has to shoo him away or else he could get burned. Now he doesn't know or understand this. He is a dog, and he can't comprehend the danger he'd be in. All he experiences is his owner in a way that appears to be kind of cold and heartless, but little does he know this is for his own good. Little does he know this is actually an act of love from his master.

Let's think about what Jesus is saying for a minute. Does a loving and wise parent always do what their child asks them to do? If a parent were to give their child everything they asked for, that parent would actually be irresponsible. There's a reason known only to God why some prayers get answered and some prayers don't. In his book on prayer, Tim Keller writes, "God will either give us what we ask or give us what we would have asked if we knew everything he knows."

One last challenge to prayer is our inability to trust God. Jesus depicts God as a loving Father, eager to give to those who ask. This resonates with some people, but for others, this is precisely the reason we don't have a close relationship with God who calls himself our Father. I mean, when I think about my dad, I realize how blessed I am to have him in my life. He is one of the most patient, kind, wise, and loving people I know. He has always provided for me and wanted what was best for me. Today we live miles apart, but he prays for me daily and encourages me often.

Some of you don't have that kind of relationship with your father. You have a dad who wasn't loving. Instead of providing for you, he ignored you. Instead of loving you, he despised you. Maybe instead of protecting you, he actually harmed you. You see, Jesus knows this can be true of you, so he just comes out and names it. He says, "...though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"

You see, God is perfect in his love. He is the perfect Father. He would do anything to show you his love. Even if you turned your back to him, he would leave the 99 to pursue you. The reason why Jesus tells us to pray is prayer is about our relationship with him. Prayer is about talking to God, about having a conversation with him. It's meant to build our relationship with our heavenly Father.

Imagine what kind of relationship you would have with someone if you never talked to them. How would you know them? How would you understand who they are? Conversation is one of the primary vehicles we have that help us relate and build friendship with others. The conversations I have with my wife, Esther, every day are what build our relationship. It's what we do more than any other activity as husband and wife. We talk to each other...a lot.
Through talking, listening, and asking questions, we're better able to understand each other: our needs, our interests, our desires. Then we can respond to that information in loving ways. Likewise, the main function of prayer is to be in a relationship with God. God has designed the order of things such that a loving relationship with him will be facilitated primarily through prayer.

God loves to be asked. He doesn't need our wisdom or our knowledge, not even the information contained in our prayers. But by inviting us into prayer, God also invites us into a deeper relationship with him. Jesus tells us to ask and pray because our relationship with the Father occurs through this kind of interaction. There's a give-and-take between him and us. Just like in human relationships, if only one person has all the power, control, and all the influence, it eliminates the personhood of the other. This is true of our relationship with God.

So God ordained things so we are, to some degree, empowered in our relationship with him, not because he *needs* us but because he *wants* us. So Jesus asks us to pray because he wants a relationship with you and me, not just to hear about what we need and to give us things but, more importantly, to deepen the relationship between us.

In Psalm 46, the psalmist says, *"God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear..."* You see, the psalmist is saying God is good not because he causes things that seem or feel good to happen in our lives, not because he gives us what we want, but because in the midst of the storms that come, in the face of trouble, God comes closer to us than the storm could ever be.

This is why we can say with confidence that God is good. This is why we can say no matter how bad the storm is, no matter how much pain we experience, no matter how different the outcome is from what we prayed for, God is good. In the hardest moments of life, God comes close to us, and he doesn't change. He doesn't falter, he doesn't quit, he doesn't leave, and he doesn't let go.

God is just as good to the parents of obedient children as he is to parents of children who have rebelled. God is just as good to the couple who can't conceive as he is to families who have as many biological children as they want. God is just as good to the family who lost their home in a fire as he is to the family whose house didn't burn down. God is just as good to the single person as he is to the person who gets married. God is just as good to the person who lost their job as he is to the person who earns promotions and climbs the ladder.

God's goodness is not dependent on any outcome or what we get. God is good because when those storms come, he comes closer to us than those storms ever can. He holds us in his arms. He doesn't change. He doesn't falter. He doesn't quit. He doesn't leave. No matter what, he never lets go. He is a perfect Father, and he wants a relationship with you.

In the last hours of his life, Jesus prayed to the Father that the cup of suffering could be passed from him. Of all the people who ever lived on this earth, Jesus was the one person who deserved to have his prayers answered. But God didn't answer this prayer. Instead, God gave Jesus what we deserved so we could receive what he deserved.

Jesus was the one who got the snake and the stone and went to the cross so we could receive the fish and the bread and be invited to sit and eat with God at his table forever. In a moment, our campus pastors are going to come and lead us in a time of prayer. Before they do that, I want to just share one of my favorite prayers from the Bible. This is from Ephesians, chapter 3.
"For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen."