

Knock And It Will Be Opened.

Although we have begun to open back up our in-person children's ministry, I know that many of the children are still watching at home and I thought, this week, about the question Jesus asked the fathers in this part of The Sermon on the Mount. How silly it would seem to a child. Of course, that is the point when Jesus says, "*Hey Fathers, which one of you if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone?*" Children, can you imagine asking your father for some bread for breakfast and him handing you a rock? Of course not. That's the point. It is too crazy and silly to take seriously. And yet, Jesus uses this silly idea to make an important point. What he is asking you is what kind of Father you do you think God is? What do you believe God the father will do when you ask him for things?

Jesus has already talked about prayer at the heart of The Sermon on the Mount. He spoke of simplicity and sincerity in prayer and gave us one of the greatest of all prayers, The Lord's Prayer. Since he has already said so much about prayer and then gone on to other important things, you have to wonder why he circles back to prayer again here. The answer is that he knows we need to be encouraged to continue in prayer with confidence in God.

There are two easily overlooked but potentially life-changing statements in this little section on prayer. Together they give you tremendous encouragement to pray with persistence.

The 1st is in **verses 7-8**. It is especially clear in **verse 8**. *For everyone who asks receives.*

The 2nd is in **verses 9-11**. It is especially clear in **verse 11**, *Your Father, who is in heaven, gives good things to those who ask him.*

The first statement, in **verses 7-8**, is focused on you and me and how we need to ask and receive. The second, in **verses 9-10**, is focused on God and the gifts he gives when we pray. Together these statements convey this one big and important truth: ***God gives good gifts to those who ask him, so you should keep asking him to give his good gifts to you.***

Let's look both parts of this truth. First, understand that Jesus tells us...

I. GOD GIVES GOOD THINGS TO THOSE WHO ASK HIM. SO KEEP ON ASKING!

Verse 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 the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.*

A. Jesus encourages sincere seekers to keep seeking God and his help in prayer.

Perhaps what prompts Jesus to circle back to the topic of prayer is the statement he just made. In **verse 6**, Jesus said, *do not give dogs what is holy and do not throw your pearls before pigs*. The point is dogs and pigs do not value what is precious and holy. Curtis talked about this last week. Perhaps Jesus knows that some of us, burdened by a sense of sin and shame, might wonder if God will withhold what is holy and precious from us because we are not worthy of his best gifts. So Jesus, wanting to encourage us to ask God for his good gifts, speaks these words. If you don't value what is holy and precious to God, do not expect him to give his best gifts to you. But if you do value what God values, come boldly to him and keep asking, seeking, knocking.

B. Jesus actually commands us to be persistent in prayer.

There are two kinds of commands in the Greek language. One is a particular command for a particular point in time - "*shut the door behind you*" would be an example of that kind of command. The other is a command that tells us that we should always do. "*Always shut the door behind you,*" would be an example. In this verse, the command to *ask, seek, and knock* is the kind that tells us that we should go on always doing these things. It could be translated, "Keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking!" If you think, "*I don't want to bother God with my concerns, and I don't see why I have to pound on the door - and keep on asking.*" You are missing the point. Jesus tells you to keep on asking; if you are *not* doing this, you are disregarding his teaching and even disobeying him. We think of prayer as a privilege, and it is, but persistent prayer is a command. Jesus tells us to keep on praying.

C. Persistence in prayer demonstrates our faith and deepens our faith at the same time.

Jesus told two memorable stories about persistence in prayer. In **Luke 11** speaks about a man who knocks on his neighbor's door at midnight and keeps on knocking until his reluctant neighbor crawls out of bed to give him a loaf of bread. Then in **Luke 18**, he tells about a widow who pesters a judge with a persistent request, day after day, until he gives in and gives her what she asks. Jesus makes it clear he is teaching by comparison and saying God is not a reluctant neighbor or an unjust judge but a gracious Father. The point is if imperfect people give in to persistent requests for help, how much more should we expect a perfect and caring father, God, to respond when we persist in prayer. Luke tells us that the point Jesus was making is that we should not easily give up in prayer – you need to be serious, earnest, persistent. Luke says he told them this second story to "*Show that at all times, they ought to pray and not to lost heart.*" At the end of the story, he asks the question: *Will the son of man find faith on the earth?* So Jesus links persistence in prayer to faith in God.

Persistence is not losing heart, and that is about having faith in God. It is common and even easy to pray in a moment of need or deep emotion. It's another thing to get serious, what the Bible calls earnest, and to pray persistently - that takes faith, and God loves faith, looks for faith, and rewards faith. Persistence deepens our faith by testing it. It tests our motives and sincerity and shows that we really are praying when we pray because something is truly important to us, and we, by faith, are truly relying on God.

D. Persistence in prayer also shows our humility to accept the mysteries of God's sovereignty and the spiritual world.

We see and understand only a very little of what exists. Scientists talk about dark matter and dark energy, which is all a huge mystery, making up the vast majority of the universe. So it shouldn't surprise us that there are things we do not understand about spiritual reality, God's sovereignty, and the spiritual warfare in which we are engaged.

There is a crazy story in **Daniel 10:11-13** that gives us a glimpse into a world most of us can only imagine. The prophet Daniel has been praying, and a terrifying, but beautiful angelic figure sent from God appears to him. He says, Daniel you are greatly loved stand up and fear not for from the first day that you set your heart to understand and prayed your words were heard, and I have come because of your words. Then in **verse 13**, he says the prince of the king of Persia withstood me twenty-one one days, and Michael, one of the chief

princes, came to help me. Michael is Michael the archangel. This angel was coming to help Daniel in response to his prayer but was delayed by a spiritual power he calls the prince of the king of Persia. He's talking about a demonic spiritual being connected in the spiritual realm attached to, possessing, influencing the king of Persia and undermining God's purposes. For some reason God allows this spiritual warfare to play out at the present. So this powerful angelic warrior sent from God is telling Daniel that even though he is greatly loved and his prayer was heard from day one, things were going on in the spiritual world that delayed the answer to his prayer.

You don't have to understand this, but Jesus wants you to know this:

E. It is a spiritual law of life that persistence in prayer is powerful.

If God chooses to grow an oak tree, then part of that plan is an acorn falling into the ground and taking root. All the great confessions of faith point out that the providence of God works through secondary causes that God uses. Our prayers are like the acorn, the seed, part of the plan by which he does his work in the world. Here's all you need to know: just as there are some things God only does by prayer, so there are some things he only does through persistence in prayer.

Here's what will help you to persist in prayer. Make a list. It's hard to persist in prayer when you only pray what pops into your mind off the cuff. So make a list. Start with the issues you fret about the most and the needs you worry about the most. Don't just worry or talk about those things; pray about them. Keep boldly asking God for help. Jesus says so clearly that everyone – everyone who asks receives! Do not fail to ask because you are too lazy, or you don't see why you have to just ask him in prayer to meet your needs. This doesn't mean you receive what you thought you needed. Or what you expected. God is not a vending machine. He is a good and caring father.

II. KEEP ASKING BECAUSE GOD GIVES GOOD GIFTS TO THOSE WHO ASK HIM.

Look at the logic of **verses 9-11**, *Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? ¹¹ 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 says two things in The Sermon On The Mount about the Fatherhood of God that cast a flood of light upon prayer.

1. First, in **Matthew 6:8**, He tells you, "*Your Father knows what you need before you ask.*"

2. Second, in **Matthew 7:11**, He tells you, "*Your Father gives good gifts to those who ask Him.*"

In those two statements, one coming before and one after the Lord's Prayer, Jesus says that your Heavenly Father responds to your prayers in light of two truths: *first, His knowledge of your deepest needs, and second, His commitment to your highest good.*

A. God, the father, knows our deepest needs.

Sometimes we are like children wanting something. We may be in pain or hurting and crying out, but we don't know what we need. Our father does. That is our confidence; the father knows what we need.

We can be foolish in our prayers. People are drowning, and they pray for swimsuits. People are starving, and instead of praying for nourishing food, they pray for candy! People are imprisoned, and instead of praying for freedom, they pray for a rug to beautify the cell! Isn't it true? We can be spiritually starving for a love only Christ can give while praying for material things to distract us from our hunger! We can be drowning in our dependence on the approval of people, but instead of praying for freedom through faith in Christ, we ask only to be better at pleasing everybody! We can be prisoners of our own self-pity, and instead of asking for strength that comes from knowing Christ, we ask for the sympathy of people who will feed that self-pity!

God, the father, knows our Deepest Needs.

B. God, the father, is committed to our highest good.

The Greeks had stories about gods who answered prayers without concern for the good of the person. In one of their myths Aurora, goddess of the dawn, fell in love with a mortal man named Tithonus. She prayed to Zeus, king of the gods that Tithonus might live forever. She forgot to ask that he remain forever young. Tithonus grew older and older. Homer said he grew so old he could not lift his arms and could only bable but would not die.¹ The gift became a curse. There is a lesson here; when we ask, God will answer, but He will answer in His

way, and it will be the way of perfect wisdom and perfect love. He will always give good gifts to those who ask Him. This is part of the comfort that comes from the Fatherhood of God. Having a Heavenly Father means even your imperfect, foolish prayers will never divert Him from your highest good and deepest needs.

1. Sometimes God gives us a good gift by denying the answer. He says, "No." Sometimes it is just God's greater wisdom and God's higher purpose. When you pray, God sometimes gives a good gift by denying the answer.

2. Sometimes God gives us a good gift by delaying the answer. He says: "wait." Hanna, in 1st Samuel 1, and Daniel, in Daniel 10, are Biblical examples of men and women who had to wait for God's answer. God did not deny the answer but delayed the response.

3. Sometimes God gives us a good gift by disguising the answer. He says: "Yes, but not the way you expected." The Apostle Paul prayed at the end of Romans 15 that he would be delivered from the people who were persecuting him in Israel and be able to visit the Romans. God gave him what he asked for but through an amazing set of circumstances that involved a wild mob, two imprisonments, and a shipwreck. You can read the story in the book of Acts. The point is sometimes the answer to your prayer may be so different than what you expected you will not even recognize it until you are on the other side of the answer, and you are able to see from a new perspective.

In church history, Monica, the mother of St Augustine. Augustine was a Christian who became one of the greatest theologians, authors, and ministers in the early church. He grew up in North Africa, and as a young man, he wanted to go to Italy, the center of the modern world in his day. Later in life, he told how his mother prayed all night that God would keep her son from setting sail for Italy. She saw her son going from bad to worse. He did not share her belief in Christ, and she couldn't imagine what would be in store for him if he went so far away from her influence, and especially to Italy, which in those days was known for its loose living and sensuality. Even while she was praying, though, her son set sail for Italy. Do you know what happened? It was in Italy that he met a Christian preacher, Ambrose, who became his friend and mentor. It was in Italy that he became a Christian. God brought Augustine to faith in Christ in the very place from which his mother's tearful fervent prayers would have kept him. Augustine, understanding this truth about the Fatherhood of God later wrote a

prayer of thanksgiving saying; " *You, in the depth of your counsels, hearing the main point of her desire, did not regard what she had asked, so that you might make me what she always wanted.*"²

Of course

4. Sometimes God gives us a good gift by delivering the answer.

He says: "Yes." And the kingdom advances, the daily bread descends, the temptation is overcome, and the evil defeated.

CONCLUSION

In his book, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, Jonathon Pennington writes, "*By itself, 7:7-11 is one of the most encouraging and hope-giving sections of the Sermon and even of the whole New Testament.*"³ He says the heart of it is the invitation to relate to God not as a mere omnipotent deity but as a good and caring Father. How do you relate to God? Did you know that this father, who gives good gifts, is described in another place in Scripture as *the father of mercies*? The word *mercy* here is also translated *compassion*. It describes not just an act but the heart and feeling behind it. To say that God is the father of mercies is to say that he is the source of and multiplies compassionate kindness and heartfelt compassion for his wayward, messy, sloppy people.⁴ God has all kinds of mercy and all kinds of mercies for all of us people. If your heart is soiled, he has mercy to cleanse and forgive. If your heart is cold, he has mercy to warm you. If your heart is inflexible, he has the mercy to gently bend you. If your heart goes astray, he has mercy to correct you.

Romans 8:32 says *He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not also with him freely give us all things?* Don't ever think that God is reluctant to give or stingy with his giving. He is not. Jesus is the greatest proof of that. God hates our sin with a holy hatred, and yet in his great mercy, he gave his son to die on the cross to pay for our sins so that we can be saved. If you face the judgment of God without Christ, based on your life's record alone, you will be condemned to eternal ruin. To receive Christ, on the other hand, is to not only be forgiven and given eternal life but adopted and invited as a beloved child of God to come boldly to the father because of Jesus. We have no right to come to God with boldness until we receive Jesus as our Savior. You have to turn to him and trust in him. Most often, you do that with a simple, sincere prayer of repentance and faith that you lift to him as you turn to him. That's your first great prayer. Start there if you haven't already, then remember, **God gives**

good gifts to those who ask him. Keep asking him to give his good gifts to you.

Amen.

Prayer of Response

Our holy and gracious Father, we confess that too often we are, as Jesus said of his first disciples, slow to believe and those of little faith. Forgive our lack of trust in you. Thank you for so loving the world that you gave your Son to be our Savior from wrath and from sin. Helps to fully believe that In Christ we can be, and, as those who believed in and received Jesus, are now your beloved children. Renew in us the spirit of sonship that comes to you with all our grief and every struggle. Give us your good gifts for your glory in Jesus name. Amen.

¹ Homer writes, *“but when loathsome old age pressed full upon him, and he could not move nor lift his limbs, this seemed to her in her heart the best counsel: she laid him in a room and put to the shining doors. There he babbles endlessly, and no more has strength at all, such as once he had in his supple limbs.”* *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, 218 ff.

² I have lost the reference, but this is found in the Confessions of St. Augustine. Google it!

³ Pennington, Jonathan, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 2018, p. 264

⁴ This is not a direct quote, but I was influenced here by Dane Ortlund in *Gentle and Lowly, The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers*. Chapter 14 is titled *The Father of Mercies*.