

The Sermon on the Mount:

God's Open Door Policy

Matthew 7:7-11 Luke 18:1-8

We come to another instruction on prayer in the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus taught on prayer earlier in the Sermon on the Mount in Matt.6, where he teaches us what we call the Lord's Prayer. But leading up to that is some equally valuable teaching, where he told us we don't have to use a lot of words, we don't have to stand on ceremony; our Father knows what we need before we ask, so we can go into our room, our quiet place, and simply come before our heavenly father sincerely and honestly with what's on our heart. There are no professional pray-ers. Only sincere pray-ers. But we are called to persevere in it—and that is the theme of *this* teaching on prayer.

I appreciate that throughout the gospels, and especially here in the Sermon on the Mount, there are reminders to pray. And I'm grateful that the gospel writers tell us that Jesus prayed, and prayed often. As a human being he needed that time of connection with the Father who said, "You are my beloved, with whom I am well pleased." And those words pronounced over Jesus are ours too. Keep that in mind as you hear this passage:

"Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

Let's look first at what Jesus teaches about the foundation for a prayer life, and then an encouragement about the practice of prayer.

First, foundationally, we have a reminder about the person to whom we pray. This is Abba, our heavenly Father. In the exact same way he did in the first teaching about prayer in Matthew 6, Jesus uses the intimate and familial term "father" and not the distant generic term "god" when speaking about the one who hears and answers our prayer. It's a term that children use when talking to their earthly parent. Since all the sermons are online now, if you want you can go

back to November 8th and be reminded of this from Jesus' teaching on prayer from Matt.6. I expanded on it more at that time.

I have a long-time friend who tells about how hard it was for him to pray when he was a young Christian. He grew up with an angry dad who often ignored his kids, and when he did interact with his children it was often abrupt and kind of negative (“stop doing that; stay out of trouble; you didn’t do a good enough job”). My friend said he always felt like he was just annoying his dad whenever he tried to talk with him. And he said he therefore viewed *God* as like an angry dad who didn’t want to be bothered. And Jesus, to him, was like the peacemaking, people-pleasing son who protected everyone from angry dad: “Oh, that’s just dad; he’s just like that... ya, I know, he likes to hurl thunderbolts at people and cause natural disasters just to show everybody who’s boss. Stick by me and I’ll keep you safe; I have a good relationship with him—I’ll talk to him so you don’t have to.” That was my friend’s view of God the father, and his son Jesus. He could pray to Jesus, who felt safe to him, but not God. Because God would just become angry, because he would feel bothered by us.

But that’s not who God is or what God is like. Jesus makes that clear here, and in many other places. Jesus points us to him and says “Go to your Father; talk

to him; he's waiting for you. And he loves to give good things to those who ask him." So, the first part of foundation of prayer is that we pray to a heavenly father who welcomes us and loves us, not a distant or angry God who doesn't want to be bothered or who is quick to criticize.

The second part of the foundation for prayer is the assurance that our prayers are heard *and answered*. The assurance that our prayers are heard *and answered: Ask, **and it shall be given**; seek, **and you shall find**; knock, **and the door will be opened***. There is no "might" or "maybe" in this. Only 100% assurance that we are heard, and that our asking, seeking and knocking receives a response.

When you pray, do you pray with the full assurance that you will be heard? And that God will answer you? Think about that... When you come to a time of prayer, do you approach it with confidence that your heavenly Father is present to you, waiting for you, and eager to hear?

John Calvin: "Nothing is better adapted to excite us to prayer than a full conviction that we shall be heard." That's about as enthusiastic as John Calvin gets! Woo hoo! Calvin is saying, I *want* to go and pray because I know that I will be heard.

Imagine, when you need to pour your heart out to someone, a person sitting across from you, who is fully present to you, fully attentive, leaning in, eager to listen to you. You can see it on their face that they take complete interest in what you're saying. And you feel like the most important person in the world at that moment. That, Jesus says (and Calvin :-), is what your heavenly Father is like.

Martin Luther (who is a little more expressive than Calvin): "Our Father knows that we are timid and shy, that we feel unworthy and unfit to present our needs to him. We think that he is so great and we are so tiny that we do not dare to pray... that is why Christ wants to lure us away from such timid thoughts, to remove our doubts, and to have us go ahead confidently and boldly." Luther probably got those words from the apostle Paul:

Ephesians 3: in Christ we have access to God in *boldness* and *confidence* through faith in him. Hebrews 10:19-22: "since we have *confidence* to enter God's presence through Christ, let us approach our Father with a sincere heart, in full assurance of faith." So, in all that the Bible teaches us about prayer, we are invited to pray with confidence, even boldness, knowing that we will be heard.

God our Father is waiting for us, and we have the full assurance that he hears and answers. So we can be confident when we approach him.

As we talked about on Nov.8, Jesus has made the Father accessible, and shows the world who he really is—the gracious and generous father who is eager to listen and provide for our true needs.

Based on this foundation of who God is and the assurance that our requests are heard and answered, what is Jesus teaching us about **how** we pray, or what our attitude should be in prayer? Here, and elsewhere, Jesus encourages us to:

Pray persistently. Be ***persistent*** in prayer. Jesus instructs us to ask, seek, knock. These seem to be deliberately set in an ascending scale of urgency. Asking is kind of low key; seeking takes it up a notch; then knocking says, “Hey, anybody home??” I think they are really three ways of saying the same thing: be persistent. Be persistent. The grammar here suggests ongoing action: keep asking, keep searching, keep knocking. I may say to my kids, when we get in the car, “put on your seat belt.” That’s a one-time instruction. But it’s another thing to say to them, “Every time you get in the car, put your seatbelt on.” That’s the intent of these words from Jesus. Every time you pray, be persistent in prayer.

There is a strong parallel here to the story we just heard from Luke's gospel—about the woman who wants justice, and she keeps bothering this grumpy judge until she gets justice. Jesus uses the grumpy old man image here as a contrast, as a way of saying, if this woman, through her persistence, can get what she needs from a grouch like *him*, how much more will you get what you need from a generous father, who is *not* a grouch. Go and talk with your heavenly father with what you need. He's not going to turn you away. Don't give up; be persistent in your asking, seeking, knocking.

And I think, how many times have I prayed for something once or twice, and then felt disappointed that nothing happened. The perseverance in prayer called for here is not just for a day, or even a week. Sometimes it requires months, or even years.

I performed a wedding a few years ago, and the mother of the young groom told me a touching story. She said that when her son was a teenager, he became a prodigal. He went down a path of making bad decisions and choosing misery for himself. Literally left home and disappeared on the family. She sought help from an older wise friend on what to do. She gave her some wonderful counsel, and among it was to pray for her son every day, using Scripture,

visualizing him in God's care. This wise mentor told her, he may seem lost to you, but he is not lost to his heavenly Father. So don't give up on praying for him every day.

And so, she did. She prayed for him every day for 5 years! Her son came to the end of his rope and sought help and began to turn his life around. And there we were, on his wedding day, celebrating a life renewed; a resurrection of sorts.

But the true blessing of that persistent prayer over 5 years, she said, was that she began to discover that her own life was changing. She discovered that she was becoming more gracious with people, and more patient. She had a strange calm, even as she was concerned about her son, whom she realized needed to walk the particular journey that he did. As she prayed, she was seeing things more from God's perspective rather than her own limited perspective. It's like her vision was widening and a window to the world was opened up to her.

Praying for someone for 5 years is a long time. Praying for our country, and our world, or ourselves, may require a long time! Why does it take so long for prayers to be answered sometimes? I don't know. But I do know that God wants to be sought after; wants to be known, and wants us to open our hearts to him

more and more, which is the true goal of prayer anyway, because it changes *us*; it transforms *us*. So, pray persistently.

We are all in different places in our spiritual journey, and God just wants us to pray. There is no formula, there are no magic words. All that's required is a sincere heart and a desire to know God, and to become Kingdom people—to act accordingly. It's quite simple. And it also requires being willing to receive what God wants to give us! Sometimes we don't feel worthy of it. But worth has nothing to do with it. Only God's love for us.

In the earlier teaching on prayer in Matt. 6, Jesus tells us not to go on “babbling,” thinking we'll be heard because of our many words; he says we don't have to do that because our father *knows what we need before we ask*. BUT, he assumes we will ask. The point is, tell him what you need. And if you don't know what you really need, ask for clarity with that!

And maybe that's where prayer begins: Father, show me what I really need! Because often times, like children, I'm not sure we really know what we truly need. Maybe on the surface we think we know what we need. But deep down inside, underneath, there is more. So sometimes prayer begins by just

opening our heart to God and being still, and quiet, and asking God to reveal the true needs of our heart.

Which leads to the question, what if *God* is silent? This requires another sermon on unanswered prayer. But sometimes God's silence is his answer (when he knows we can handle it) and in the silence we can know that we are loved and held by God (even apart from our senses) because that may be our true need in that moment: to know we're loved. To trust that it's true.

Sometimes God's answer is "no" or "not yet." Or "wait, and keep watch." This is why we must be persistent. Because in the stillness and the quietness and the persistence, we learn to know our true needs over time, and begin to see things from God's perspective, and not just ours.

The assurance in Jesus' teaching on prayer is that our heavenly father gives good gifts to those who ask. He uses an illustration from our family life: if a kid asks a parent for some basic need, like food, we're not going to give them gravel to break their teeth on; or something awful. And if we who are imperfect parents know how to provide for our kids, and are pleased to do it, how much happier and more capable is our Father in providing for us.

Let me close with a great promise. More than one promise, actually!

It's from the words of assurance in our order of worship. Jer. 29:11 is the well-known verse (I know that plans I have for you—plans to prosper you and not to harm you; plans to give you a future, with hope). It's a wonderful promise, but we usually stop there and don't read the second half of the passage that goes with it (verses 12-13), which says, "then when you call upon me and pray to me I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me, if you seek me with all your heart.