

Asking the Father

Matthew 7:7-11

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The great hymn writer John Newton, who experienced deep and difficult seasons of a dark night of the soul, who himself struggled with depression, for him at times, the grace of God was so apparent and at other times his eyes could not see. And yet, God in His faithfulness cared for John. And out of those seasons came great hymns. One such hymn is titled "Come, My Soul, Thy Suit Prepare." Hear the opening two verses.

"Come, my soul, thy suit prepare. Jesus loves to answer prayer. He, himself, has bid thee pray. Therefore, will not say thee nay. Thou art coming to a king, large petitions with thee bring, for his grace and power are such none can ever ask too much."

Do we believe that?

Hear what Jesus says to us regarding prayer. As He leads us this morning in this portion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches again on the beauty and power of prayer. He says these words to us about asking the Father. Matthew 7:7-11,

"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!" [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. And so, I ask you again, do you believe these words? "Thou art coming to a king, large petitions with thee bring, for his grace and power are such that none can ever ask too much." Amen. Let's pray.

Now, heavenly Father, we ask you for the great gift of your Holy Spirit, that you would awaken our sleepy souls, our weakened faith, our diminished hope not because you are any of those things, but because Father, we find ourselves more and more dependent on ourselves and not dependent on you. So, by your Spirit, awaken our sleepy souls to the goodness of our heavenly Father and Jesus who taught us how to pray, who Himself is interceding for us this very moment at your right hand. And so, we would ask for your Holy Spirit to awaken us, to stir us to ask you for great things, that you would enable us to experience a season of prayer. Not a season of prayer marked by our goodness, but that would be marked by our experience of yours. Enable us by your Spirit individually and corporately to ask of you great things. Our king, our Father, our redeemer, the Lord Jesus, and the name of the Holy Spirit we pray. Help the teacher. Amen.

Many Christians are aware of the commands that Jesus gives regarding prayer. We believe it's necessity. We believe and even have experienced the beauty of prayer. And we even experience a sincere yearning for a life of prayer. Yet, apart from episodic efforts at prayer, we soon abandon prayer. Few of us remain faithful to prayer, and even fewer are really convinced and satisfied by our own practice of prayer. In the life of the church, prayer is surrounded by an atmosphere of guilt, despondency, and a lack of courage. We would like to pray, but we often cannot manage it. Our time of prayer passes leaving us often distracted. We might even experience new spurts and a desire to pray, but we find ourselves, within seconds or minutes of praying, falling asleep. That's been my experience.

We often sometimes yield to this cynicism within us and we give up on prayer because it doesn't at least show forth anything effective or tangible. From time to time, we take up books of prayer that actually present us with prayers that we ourselves ought to be praying. We'll take up books that talk about seasons and how to have a season of renewal and deeper prayer and contemplation of the Lord. But much like watching someone else eat, their eating doesn't fill our bellies. Or, we have libraries. If you come to mine, I have a spiritual life section of my library. I am familiar with many of the authors. I have even gained something that's recommendable not only to me, but to you. But guess what? I'm reading of their experience, not of my own.

And so, we come to this intersection, much like we were talking about last week, the intersection between our fear and the future. And we come to this intersection of our daily life and the call to prayer. And we're reminded of the seasons which we have tried to pray. What's interesting is, oftentimes, out of fearfulness that we don't pray the right thing or we're not going to pray enough, it leads us to lack greater confidence in what God has called us to do in His Son who gives us the call to prayer.

In prayer, moreover, we speak to a God who Himself long ago has revealed Himself to us. And I want you to hear this because I was reminded of it this past week as I prepared. Not a single promise to you if you are a Christian, not a single promise to the church of Jesus Christ is ever past tense. It is always present and always has an unfolding in the future. I will be your God and you will be my people. A loving Father invites us to prayer. But He does more than invite. He actually commands us to pray.

But as one writer said, "Just think of our Father when he addresses us each day. Does he not address us by his word?" Prayer is not a special little incantation where we're waiting to hear from God. Ladies and gentlemen, this is where God speaks. God speaks to you and me every single day. And He speaks to us this word, and He has taught us. Jesus, in the red-letter section of the gospels, teaches us, invites us, commands us, even gives us the language on which to pray.

And so, this is the beauty of what we will learn from this morning's word is that thanks be to God, prayer never begins with you and me. God has always had the first word. Always. He is the one who prayed for us before we ever prayed to Him. "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." He prays for His church. He prayed for His children before we even knew what prayer was about. God has always spoken first. So, prayer never begins with us. It is God who is speaking to us. Our prayer is always a response. That is good news because that means that the effectiveness of prayer is not based on us or our eloquence or the smallness or largeness of our faith. It is the one to whom we pray who has been the first to speak to us about prayer and who invites and commands us to do so.

I have one point with three subpoints. Once a Presbyterian, always a Presbyterian. But one point. Here it is. A license to pray. And as we look at this license to pray, we'll notice three things about this command to pray. It ought to be consistent, pervasive, and expectant.

Let's go together to a license to pray. We'll notice that God is always, as I said, the first word. He's the one who has revealed to us the eternal word. We wouldn't know what prayer is unless God taught us. And here, as Jesus has already taught us how to pray, our Father in heaven, hallowed be thy 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. Jesus taught us how to pray. But He more than just gave us words of prayer, He's giving us the rubric.

But it is Jesus who prayed, the perfect Son of God, perfect human, perfectly divine, yet one person, two natures. And Jesus walked in faith, although it doesn't use those words. When Jesus prayed, "Father, take this cup of suffering from me," that was Jesus walking in faith. Thanks be to God. He's teaching us not just what to say, but He's praying. And it is God who says to us, come and pray.

And I want to say this about prayer. We'll see not one drip of a transactional nature with regard to prayer. It is not about us praying, putting a few coins into a Coke machine, and then getting a Coke out of it. Prayer is never transactional. It is always described as relational. And Jesus, when He tells us and

commands us here, I want you to know that He is giving us the license in our hand. And He is saying, pray.

What should this prayer look like? First, it should be consistent. Notice when we look at these words, verse 7 includes three imperatives: ask, seek, knock. It's not three different kinds of prayer or three different aspects of prayer. It's just three imperatives that are given in the present tense. And the present tense of Greek means it's always ongoing. It is to consistently happen. And it is an imperative that says, ask, seek, knock. It is a reminder and a call that it is to be always an ongoing versus episodic. And don't we often experience this when we have fallen short of not consistently praying because we feel guilty that we haven't prayed enough or prayed in the right ways or seen something tangible happen? But then we start getting serious when the proverbial stuff hits the fan and life gets difficult.

But here's the beauty of God's grace. He still loves us when we pray. Even in our episodic fury and flurrying around in prayer, God does not say, well, you just haven't been enough. Our Father still receives us. And in essence, in His grace, He's saying, where have you been? I love you anyway. Give me your episodes. But the beautiful thing here is consistence.

And it doesn't have to be a special hour or 15 minutes. It can be sentence prayers throughout the day. That's my sweet spot. I do popcorn prayers, not meaning it's light and fluffy. It means those needs are coming up in the car, on a phone call, whatever it might be. I'm trying to learn consistently that God is not impressed about the largeness or the length of my prayers. I'm just going to send it up. You know, my marriage is not going to go so well if I only talk to Kate when it's episodically necessary, which thanks be to God is more frequent than I would like to admit. I mean, I need her. But it's not going to go so well for me if I only talk to her 15 minutes or once a week. What am I missing out on? I'm missing out on someone with whom I can share, someone who cares, someone who listens. It will not be the marriage that it's intended to be.

The same is the case here. It is not that God gives up on us if this is all we're doing. It's that our experience of being in conversation with our heavenly Father will be diminished. So, He says, consistently pray. Ask, seek, knock. Seek, by the way, is like what we looked at last week, this idea of running and pursuing. Remember what He said last week when He says, "Why do you seek after such things?" What you will wear, what you will eat, and about your life. The whole idea there is since it's become such a distraction to you, what would it look like if we were a people distracted because we were praying so much? Not that life is so distracting that we're not praying much. It's an invitation to consistently come to Him.

But the other side of those imperatives are three indicatives. Do you hear what it says? "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." Those are indicative, meaning they're not in the passive voice which means we don't do it, God does. And it doesn't mean that it's transactional, that what we're praying for we're always going to get. Remember, it's consistent not only with who He is, but it's consistent with His will. So, as we offer up these things, we offer them up in His name according to His glory. But we ask Him. We seek it. We knock on the door.

Paul did this when he desired to go into Asia Minor with the gospel. And each time, the door was closed. He actually says that the Spirit closed the door. That didn't keep him from asking, though, and to keep asking, to go on asking.

And the answer will come. But it may not come in our timing. I'm not suggesting that consistently praying doesn't have its frustrations because we don't get the answer that we want or in the time that we want it. But this is where trusting in consistent prayer with a God who loves us and cares for us that we can trust Him also. That if He invites us and commands us to consistently pray, as my friend said, "If we're going to consistently take him up on this call to pray, then we have to be ready for when he answers." And that's the rub, isn't it? Do we trust Him to be good?

Two weeks ago, I heard a sermon that I didn't expect to hear. It was on the nature of the fear of the disciples when they were in the boat on the Sea of Galilee. If you recall that story, the storm rises up and the boat is almost overcome. They're starting to take on water. And these are fishermen, and they saw this as a problem. They were familiar with the Sea of Galilee. And yet, when they looked at Jesus and He was sleeping, He awoke and then He stopped the storm. Guess what? That didn't calm their fears. The text actually says they were then really afraid, and they said, "Who is this?" And my friend wisely counseled, God is not offended by asking Him to awake. We just need to be ready when he does. And that oftentimes, we become even more afraid because we recognize that He is the Lord of the universe, the creator of all things whose word is eternal and never fails and will achieve His will for His glory and for our good.

We must acknowledge that to be consistent in prayer, we must also recognize and confess that we don't believe God to be fundamentally good. We must admit that oftentimes we don't pray because we fear that God is inconsistent. And we fear that if we pray this, that God will give us the opposite. What is up with that? That is called the intersection between our sin and the onslaught and deceit of the enemy who doesn't want us praying. But God says to us here, come, knock, ask, seek.

Pervasive. What we see here in this text is not only that the verb tense gives us a consistency, but we might think that when He talks about prayer and commands us to pray these things through the examples of a bad parent, that if a son asks you for bread you give him a stone, it's somehow thinking that maybe what Jesus is telling us we ought to be praying about is our felt needs or that there is a boundary around what we can pray for. But here is the reminder of the teaching of the gospels, that we approach Him as a father like little children. By pervasive, I mean it's about everything, that a season and a heart of prayer and a desire to be consistent in it is pervasive through all elements of our lives, both the mundane and the extraordinary, the small and the large.

God actually cares for that person in your office with whom you have a consistent point of friction, and you don't want to work with them, and you don't know how you're going to deal with the conflict. Are you praying that God would give you words of wisdom and a tongue that is anointed to respond in a way that the gospel would call you to respond? Are we praying about even those kinds of things? Are we praying for those conversations that we need to have with our family members that are difficult to have but that we need to have? But because we're so accustomed to the relationships, we think we've got it. We think we know how it's going to go. And so, we don't pray about them.

In other words, the idea of being consistent in prayer also carries with it being pervasive. But it doesn't mean we're presumptive in our prayers. This is not health and wealth where if we ask God, the king, as His children that He's always going to give us great kingly gifts. That's a false gospel. It isn't that I can ask my heavenly Father for a brand new 2020 car because that's what He wants for me because my Father is good. Well, yeah, He is good. But that doesn't mean I can be presumptive and ask Him for whatever assuming that He's going to answer every whim and desire of my heart.

At the corner of this area of prayer is laying down our desires and giving them to Him and trusting that He will give according to His goodness. This means that at times, we have to give up both our fears and our desires. And that can be a place of tears.

Last week if you were with us, I asked you during the sermon to take a few moments and to consider quietly the fears that you often carry in your own hearts but maybe don't speak to other people, and I asked you to bring those fears to the Lord. Well, that came because that's what I needed to do. I needed that season. And so, I took that season. And at the end of that season, there were fears and there were desires that I needed to bring to the Father that I was keeping over in the corner room at the back of the house that I didn't think He had the key to, and that if He did have the key to it and God saw into that corner of fears and desires, He would be okay with it. But I needed to cough those up and trust that He is a good Father and will provide in ways I can't yet see. And I needed to allow the Lord to come into that room. He knew them anyway. The issue is, prayer is not about discovering what God knows. It's

discovering what are we willing to acknowledge that God knows. Prayer isn't about changing God. Prayer is about changing us, and that begins with being pervasive in praying all these things to Him.

But then it's not just to be consistent and pervasive, but for it to be expectant. When He says here, "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!"

Here, I want to pause for just a second and address perhaps something that is painful for some of you. The whole notion or image of God as Father is conflated with the failures of your earthly fathers. And so, it is difficult for you to enter in to be expectant of a heavenly Father because that's clouded over by the failures of your own. I recognize that there might be many in this room who feel just that way. But the reason why Jesus uses this language is not to poke in at our pain but to show us how the whole idea of fatherly care can be reframed by a God who never fails and a God who always loves and is merciful. For some of you, your fathers gave you serpents. And not only did they not give you bread, didn't even give you a stone. That is real and that is painful, and we need to acknowledge that reality. But I want you to know that your heavenly Father invites you in nonetheless to see this. That His love and mercy and care for you is so great and so perfect that it makes the best earthly fathers look as if they've failed miserably. He invites us in to see a fatherly love and care that is without measure, without exhaustion, without failure.

Jesus calls us to pray expectantly. He is acknowledging that even our faithfulness as a parent pales in comparison to the glory and love of our heavenly Father. And so, He invites us, and He says how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him? Does that really need much explanation? Because it is God who is speaking.

Jesus is speaking to His disciples who themselves didn't know how to pray, and yet they were with Jesus. They saw Him do miraculous things. But even they struggled to ask and trust that Jesus knew what He was doing. They struggled with that, and He was right there. That should be instructive to us who feel as though praying expectantly with hope to a heavenly Father is like walking into a foreign country whose language we do not understand.

I was with Anthony Swon when we traveled to meet church planters in Europe. And I went into this restaurant where we were having lunch, and I wanted Seltzer water. And I didn't know how to say that in Italian. So, I asked for it, and the waitress taught me in perfect Italian how to speak it thinking I knew Italian. And I said, no, I don't speak Italian. And in perfect English, she told me how to say Seltzer water. And even when she taught it to me, I tried to reflect that back miserably.

Isn't it hard to pray expectantly with hope when oftentimes prayer for us feels like a foreign language? We grope for the right words. We feel like we're stammering. Isn't that what leads us to find books on prayer or journals and stories about how people have prayed for great things, and we read what they pray, and it's like, but I want to pray like that. And then we're left in our rooms or in our cars or praying by ourselves or with our families, and we pray as if it's a complete foreign language.

The good news is that being an expectant, hopeful people in prayer doesn't have to do with our ability to speak the right language because it is about opening our hearts and even using simple language. God, have mercy on us. Lord, help me today. Lord, show me how I can be in obedience to you in school or at work or in my neighborhood. It doesn't require eloquence. It is simply an invitation and command to come to one who has said, I will give you much more than the best of earthly fathers because I am good, and my love endures forever.

So, does that mean in the Christian life that we should just always be stammering and groping for the right words? No. We ought to grow in our ability to pray, in our ability to know ourselves, and to know what we desire and what we long for, what we fear, and bring that to the Father that it might flow

from lips that understand the language of bringing our desires and fears to Him consistently, pervasively, and expectantly.

The only way I have learned how to pray is to literally pray God's word back to Him. I don't know if you've done this in your life, but it allows us to do two things. One, it's teaching us how to pray, and we're taking the eternal word of God and praying it back to the one who is the source of it. And I want to share with you that my most recent practice is instead of reading multiple Psalms a day, I'm taking one Psalm and I'm reading it the entire week. I'm not trying to memorize it. At first, I start the week with just reading it, and I might pick up a word or two. But by the end of the week, I say, Father, hear my prayer. And I just read the Psalm back to Him. And what I'm finding is that throughout the day, there's a curious intersection between what I've just read and what I've been reading that week with what I'm experiencing. And those words come back. Those words begin to shape how we pray and what we pray. But the beauty is it gives us a beautiful picture of the one who invites us to pray.

This week's prayer for me has been Psalm 27. "The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid?" And I began to pray that back to Him. I heard the Father speaking to me through the very word that I was speaking back to Him. Were my problems solved? No. Were all my questions answered? Absolutely not. But I found myself at peace. I found myself at rest. And I began to see even as I was preparing for this sermon, Lord, what are you teaching me about the life of prayer? And the truth is my greatest obstacle to praying is not my life or my problems or my lack of eloquence. It's that I'm self-dependent.

We prize what we bring into our brains, what we've learned. We prize these things to such a degree that we so easily move throughout the pace of our days and we're not praying. In an essence, we're saying, we've got this. We'll call you up when we need you.

But God in His mercy and His love gives us a word for this Sunday, for you, and for me, and for this church, that we can become more and more a people who are praying. And that we come to Him with everything, the present and the future, to a Father who is good, who loves to give us good things, in whom we find our home, in whom we find rest for our weary distracted souls. May the Lord make us more and more a people of prayer beginning today because He calls us as our Father to pray. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word, for your word invites us again to come to you with all that we are, to place our hope in you. So, Lord, we ask in humble reliance upon the gospel of Jesus Christ who died for us, who is raised to life for us, has commanded us to ask, seek, and to knock. Lord, help us to do so. We cannot do it without your Spirit. You are the first one to speak, and you will be the last one to speak. Lord, help us to be a people who respond with all that we are. In Jesus's matchless, mighty, and powerful name we pray. Amen.