

Sermon 42, Persistent Prayer, Matthew 7:7-11

“In order, therefore, that these three things--viz. asking, seeking, knocking--may be made clear, let us suppose, for example, the case of one weak in his limbs, who cannot walk: in the first place, he is to be healed and strengthened so as to be able to walk; and to this refers the expression He has used, "Ask." But what advantage is it that he is now able to walk, or even run, if he should go astray by devious paths? A second thing therefore is, that he should find the road that leads to the place at which he wishes to arrive; and when he has kept that road, and arrived at the very place where he wishes to dwell, if he find it closed, it will be of no use either that he has been able to walk, or that he has walked and arrived, unless it be opened to him; to this, therefore, the expression refers which has been used, "Knock."” — Augustine

Aug., *Retract.*, i, 19: “How these three differ from one another, I have thought good to unfold with this travail; but it were better to refer them all to instant prayer; wherefore He afterwards concludes, saying, "He will give good things to them that ask him."”

“But the Lord is good, who often gives us not what we would, that He may give us what we should rather prefer.” — Augustine

Proposition: God’s generosity gives us really strong reasons to pray!

- I. First Reason to Pray: You’ll Receive What You Ask For, vv. 7-8**
- II. Second Reason to Pray: Earthly Fathers Are Generous, vv. 9-10**
- III. Third Reason to Pray: Your Heavenly Father Is Extremely Generous, v. 11**

Some of you are fans of the 1962 Philip K. Dick novel *The Man in the High Castle* and the TV show of the same name, now broadcasting its 3rd season on Amazon. As you may know, the premise of that show is that the Axis powers won WWII, and that America has been carved into a Nazi zone on the east coast and a Japanese zone on the West Coast. In short, the show is set within the genre of “alternate history,” and it asks “What would have happened if . . .?”

I want to ask this morning, “What would have happened if Jesus had phrased our text this morning negatively?” After all, this text is designed to be a huge dose of encouragement in the middle of a section of punishing demands. You aren’t supposed to harshly judge anyone, ever. However, you are required to decide that some people are pigs and dogs and alter your behavior toward them accordingly. Oh, by the way, be sure that you take the narrow road and enter the narrow gate. The popular is all wrong, and goes straight to Hell. Look out for false teachers, too, and whatever you do, don’t build on the sand. Obey every word Jesus says!”

That’s a brief summary of what this chapter requires. So again, I ask, what if, in the middle of all that, Jesus had said this:

Don’t ask, and it will not be given to you; stop seeking, and you will never find; don’t knock, and the door will remain shut. For everyone who fails to ask gets nothing, and he

who never seeks never finds, and to him who never knocks, the door is never opened. You give good gifts to your children only when they ask. How much less will your Father give you anything good unless you directly ask Him for it?

Let that sink in for a second. Now, does the new version change what Jesus said? Yes, it does. How? By suggesting that unless you ask, you will never get anything from God. In short, it takes an encouragement and effectively turns it into a condemnation. Brothers and sisters, only in an alternate history is this text a condemnation. In the real world, what Jesus actually said is very different. It's an inspiration. It's an encouragement. It's fundamentally the insistence that God loves to give and loves to be asked. His generosity gives us really strong reasons to pray. In the midst of these tough commands, Jesus tells us that we have unlimited resources available simply for the asking. So, He says, ask!

I. First Reason to Pray: You'll Receive What You Ask For, vv. 7-8

In the alternate-history version of this passage of scripture, Jesus said

Don't ask, and it will not be given to you; stop seeking, and you will never find; don't knock, and the door will remain shut. For everyone who fails to ask gets nothing, and he who never seeks never finds, and to him who never knocks, the door is never opened.

But is that true? Of course not! We are given untold things before we are even born, before we can even speak. If we had to ask for everything we need to have a decent life on this earth, we'd still be asking! That's why Jesus didn't put this negatively, but positively.

The promise is that you'll receive what you ask for. Jesus repeats it 6 times, in case you couldn't believe Him the first time. He tells us to ask. But if you don't know what to ask, then seek. Look for what you need to ask for. Search for it. Keep on searching! And when you find out what it is, but the way is shut, knock on that door. You will receive. You will find. The door will be opened. You will get what you asked for!

There are three things about this doubled triple imperative that I want to point out to you. First of all, it is an imperative. Jesus isn't saying, "If you need anything, just ask." He's saying, "You do need plenty of things. Ask me for them. Ask your Father for them." Asking isn't optional; asking is mandatory.

Secondly, this is a plural imperative. He's talking to the group here. All of you ask. All of you seek. All of you knock. In other words, if you only pray by yourself, you are violating the command of Jesus. I'm serious here. Jesus expects and envisions that His followers will pray together. I recently read a book by an Irish pastor on prayer. He tried to trace every reference to prayer in the entire Bible and put it all together into a total picture. Here's what he said:

With the exception of the Pastoral Epistles and Philemon, [the material we have looked at is] embedded in letters written to groups of individuals — all these injunctions are

addressed to *churches*. Given the fact that the prayers in Acts are predominantly prayers of the gathered church, and the encouragements to pray in the Pauline epistles seem to be largely addressed to the gathered church, it seems that the present practice of prayer largely being relegated to the private sphere is out of step with the practice of the New Testament.

Do you hear that? When Jesus says *pray*, He says “Y’all pray!” “Y’all ask! Y’all seek! Y’all knock!” That this isn’t limited to “y’all individually” is clear from the way the rest of the New Testament instructs us to pray as churches, not just as individuals. Is the New Testament opposed to individual prayer? Not in any way, shape, or form. But in addition to individual prayer, it requires corporate prayer.

This means that you need to be praying with your family. According to Jesus’ words here, family worship including a time of prayer is not something that’s only for super-Christians. Anyone who wants to obey Jesus’s direct command needs to be praying with other believers. Like all God’s commands, obedience to this one starts at home. You need to have a routine time built into your day in which you and your family pray together.

But further, this plural imperative means that we as a church need to pray together. We need to ask — together. We need to seek — together. We need to knock — together. That’s literally right here in the very words of Jesus! We have a specific time set aside every week to do that. It’s one of my favorite events of the week. We call it a prayer meeting — a time when we get together to pray as a church, to ask as a church, to seek as a church, to knock as a church. In other words, it’s a time when we come together to do what Jesus told us to do, which is to pray together. Brothers and sisters, we have had a regular prayer meeting for 8 months now. Three families out of the eighteen at this church have come to it. Why is that? What is more important to you than obeying Jesus? I understand that you might be busy on Wednesday nights fulfilling God’s other commands, such as the command to work 6 days and provide for your family. But if that’s not what you’re doing, then you’re disobeying Jesus. He didn’t say, “Y’all ask, y’all seek, y’all knock when you have time, when nothing better is on the schedule, when it’s convenient.”

Understand that only in the alternate history version is this condemnation. I’m not here to tell you that you’ll never get anything from God now, because you failed to ask. That isn’t what Jesus said. But positively, He did say to ask. He did say to knock. He did say to seek. And He said we need to do it together, as families and churches as well as individuals. Please, come to prayer meeting. Please obey Jesus. I know for a fact that prayer meeting has not been tried and found wanting; to paraphrase Chesterton, it has been found difficult and left untried. Let’s change that as a congregation. Let’s pray together as a church in fulfillment of Jesus’ command to us.

So the first reason to pray is that Jesus commands it and promises that you will receive.

II. Second Reason to Pray: Earthly Fathers Are Generous, vv. 9-10

The second reason to pray is that earthly fathers are generous. They give their children what they need! Children, if you need a shirt, a snack, a meal, do you have any doubt but that your daddy will provide it for you? I know you don't. Fathers, you hear Jesus' question. Is there anyone here who would give his son a rock instead of a piece of bread, or a scorpion instead of an egg? I know there's not. Even earthly fathers are generous.

III. Third Reason to Pray: Your Heavenly Father Is Extremely Generous, v. 11

Well, Jesus' application of this second reason is obvious: your Father in Heaven is even more generous than any earthly father. He will give good gifts to everyone who asks Him. The parallel passage in Luke makes it clear that the particular good gift in view is the Holy Spirit. God will give the Holy Spirit to the one who asks Him for Him!

So does this mean that God will give you a pet Tasmanian Devil, or a Lamborghini? The point is not that. No, the point is that God will give you good things — all the things you need for spiritual life and prosperity, and all the earthly prosperity that you need for spiritual benefit. As far as it serves His glory and your good, He will give you long life and prosperity.

Prayer is not a religious ritual that you do because you have to. Prayer is talking to God because you (a) need to spend time with Him and (b) need things that only He can provide. Most of us have not had a conversation with Bill Gates this year, despite the fact that many or most of us looked up some kind of help on how to use a Microsoft product over the course of the year. Why didn't you call Bill Gates when you couldn't figure out how to make Excel do what you wanted? Because other help was available, and because you didn't really have any reason to talk to him. On the other hand, all of us who have living mothers have spoken to them this year — not necessarily for tech support, but because we need to spend time with them.

If you know and love your Heavenly Father, then you will want to spend time with Him, including in corporate prayer. If you want to do the difficult things that Jesus commands in this Sermon on the Mount, then you will need your Father's help!

Brothers and sisters, reach out and ask. As I said, this is condemnation only in an alternate history that never happened. In the real world, this is inspiration. This is encouragement: Jesus says, "Please ask me, because my Father and I love to answer requests!" So be encouraged. Ask, and you will receive. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you. Amen.