

## JESUS' SERMON ON THE MOUNT

### XVI. "Praying Boldly"

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Mtt. 7:7-12

#### INTRODUCTION

Dr. Scott Harrison, an orthopedic surgeon from Pennsylvania, answering Christ's call has made many trips to the African nation of Malawi, one of the poorest nations on earth, to volunteer in a hospital there. One busy morning, he was performing hip surgery on a young woman who was infected by HIV. He had a group of student doctors in the surgery with him, training them in this kind of operation. Suddenly, one of her blood vessels burst. He pinched it off between his fingers and explained to the students, "When this happens, and you don't have the necessary equipment, you can pinch off the vessel between your fingers until it clots. Look at the clock and tell me when ten minutes are up. By then the vessel should be clotted." While they waited, he said they talked for what seemed like ten minutes, then he turned to look at the clock. The hands hadn't moved. "It appears Sir," one of the students said hesitatingly, "that the clock doesn't work." Dr. Harrison said, "We'll just wait a few more minutes to be safe, then I'll let go." Finally, when he removed his hand, the vessel held fine. But, to his dismay, he saw a gaping hole in the finger of the glove with which he'd pinched off the vessel. Unfortunately, that morning he'd cut that very finger. He took the glove off and his hand was covered with blood. Dr. Scott Harrison writes, "I was certain I was infected. Nothing could be done about it. Not a thing. It would be two months before a test would reveal if I was HIV positive. I returned to America wondering if I faced a death sentence.

"I told our congregation what happened. Clair, a middle-school music teacher, came up to me afterward. 'You know,' he said, 'While you and Sally were gone I promised myself I'd pray. I kept putting it off until one day in band practice. Suddenly I *knew* I had to pray for you. The feeling was so strong, I asked one of the other teachers to take over my class. I went into the teachers' conference room and prayed for about ten minutes—until I got a feeling the danger had passed.'"

"When was this?" Scott asked.

"The same day you were doing that surgery. The oddest thing too, Scott. That whole time I had this image of a huge clock on a white wall. The hands weren't moving. All I could see was the motionless clock."

Now Scott had not said anything about that clock in his talk to the church. When the tests came back that Scott *was not* HIV positive, one of the first people he told other than his wife was Clair.

Such stories about prayer, its power, and its importance inspire us. According to Gallup polls, more Americans will pray this week than will exercise, drive a car, or go to work. Nine in ten of

us pray regularly and three-fourths of us claim to pray every day. The very word for prayer comes from the Latin root, *precarius*— a linguistic cousin to “precarious.” And, in precarious situations, almost all of us turn to prayer. Yet most of us, if we’re really honest, would have to confess to a lot of confusion about prayer as well as frequent feelings of inadequacy. While I expect you wouldn’t be here today if you didn’t believe in the power of prayer, at the same time you may be struggling with doubts about the value of your prayers and wrestle with questions about just how prayer works. In fact most of us probably have more questions than answers about prayer. At the same time, we know we don’t pray as much as we should.

In our Scripture this morning, Jesus gives one of His most helpful teachings about prayer. Earlier in this Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has taught us how to pray, with the Lord’s Prayer, beginning, “Our Father...” Now, He continues that same Father-son analogy with promises that move us to bold, persistent prayer.

Mtt. 7:7-12

### **THE PROMISE**

The promises of our text are astonishingly open-ended. If you read this passage with simple faith, it almost takes your breath away! Six times in six ways in two verses we are urged to pray. Jesus repeats each powerful verb twice: “Ask,” “seek,” and “knock.” In the first verse (7), the verbs are present tense imperatives— a command.

*"Ask and it will be given to you;  
seek and you will find;  
knock and the door will be opened to you.*

Then, as if that isn’t enough, he reiterates these three verbs with an even stronger promise, in the second verse, vs. 8:

*For everyone who asks receives;  
he who seeks finds;  
and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.*

But now the verbs are present tense participles, which in the Greek, conveys continuous action, continually asking, seeking, and knocking. So, boldness in prayer and persistence are both taught here.

Can prayer be this simple and straight-forward? Certainly, if we can trust anything Jesus says, the answer is “yes.” Throughout His ministry He demonstrates this again and again— a simple asking His heavenly Father and people are healed, demons are driven out, storms are stilled, and bread and fish are multiplied. So, why isn’t our experience this simple and satisfactory?

Notice, first of all, these promises are rooted in who God is and our relationship with Him. Jesus tells us that God is a loving heavenly Father, attentive to our needs. He is not capricious or unpredictable. He isn’t trying to confuse us or disappoint us. Jesus is obviously encouraging the reluctant-to-pray spirit with this analogy:

*"Which of you, if his 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!*

What an incredible view of God! He is not “someone way out there,” the Creator of the universe who is not concerned about us. He is intimately involved as an earthly father would be with the smallest cares and details of our lives. Pushing that analogy of an earthly father further, as an earthly parent, wouldn't you feel bad if your child kept his legitimate needs from you? What if your daughter was hungry, but felt unworthy to ask for food? How about if her shoes were too small and hurting her feet, but she didn't want to bother you because you worked so hard to make a living? Suppose your son was having a hard time at school with some bullies, being ridiculed, but he didn't want to bother you with it, thinking he could handle it by himself. Wouldn't you feel bad?

Asking, seeking, and knocking are all part of building an intimate relationship. In pre-marital counseling, I talk about the various levels of communication. At the deepest level, where true intimacy is created, there is a vulnerability and an honesty with our feelings and needs. Isn't that your experience in marriage or a close relationship? When the other person admits their feelings of inadequacy, their confusion, or asks for your help, isn't there a binding together of your hearts in that? An honest, transparent exposure of ourselves and our concerns to another person is relationship-enhancing. On the other hand, independence and an “I can handle it myself” attitude does not bind us together, does it? Jesus is telling us in an unmistakable way that our heavenly Father wants an intimate relationship with us. He wants us to share everything with Him, just as any earthly parent delights in that sharing from their children. Earlier He has told us that even our “daily bread,” our mundane needs, are worthy of prayer.

As I mentioned, the first “ask,” “seek,” and “knock” are commands by Jesus— in the imperative. However, as He repeats them in verse 8, they are a tense that suggests an ongoing, continuous action. This process of persisting in our asking is instructive. Keeping the parent/child metaphor, any parent know that every request by a child isn't that serious. Going through a store, we hear, “Can I have this or that?” dozens of times. A wise parent doesn't respond to or denies most of them, perhaps granting one out of dozens of askings. We know these are not important things— they are spur of the moment desires that will soon fade and don't represent serious needs. What do we do with our children as Christmas approaches? We listen for those things which seem to represent deep-seated desires, that keep coming up, knowing those will probably be the right gifts to give— ones they won't be bored with after the first day.

So, the process of asking, seeking, and knocking is a refining process for us. This should not be just a mindless repetition of our shopping list to God, but a working-out of the core issues of what we really need the most. So what may begin as a prayer for healing may end up a prayer for character and growth through dealing with the sickness. A prayer for a better job may get transmuted into a prayer to make you better for the job you have.

Notice also, there is a progression in these three verbs: ask, seek, and knock. Jesus is telling us to move from simple request to seeking, pursuing it further. Then the knocking implies that we've

arrived at the right place, the place God has directed us to, and are boldly seeking to move into what God has provided. So our continuing in prayer is not designed to be mindless repetition, but is meant to lead us to the right prayer.

Here we get to a key part of what Jesus is saying. God only gives good gifts. Listen to vs. 9-11 again.

*"Which of you, if his 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!*

## THE GOOD GIFTS

Jesus tells us there is a limit to the answers of our asking, seeking, and knocking. God will not give us anything we ask for unless it is good for us. Here, we must trust to His wisdom. We don't always know what is best.

Suppose your son was asking you for a brand new red Ferrari as a gift for when he passed his driver's test? And, supposing money was not an issue— it was well within your budget. Would that be a good gift? Certainly not. And any wise, loving, discerning father would say no.

Dr. Larry Crabb, a Christian author, counselor, and popular speaker, tells a cute story about when he was ten- years-old. He heard Mtt. 21:22, another of Jesus' wonderful prayer promises, *If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer*. He ran outside, and standing on the driveway, closed his eyes real tight and prayed: "God, I want to fly like Superman. And I believe you can do it. So I'll jump, and you take it from there." He says he jumped four times and each time landed a second later a foot farther down the driveway.

While that can be disappointing and confusing to a ten-year-old, as adults we can understand where that would not be a good gift. We know (I hope) that God *could* do it. But, we also understand that it is not a good idea having ten-year-olds flying around like superman. That is a scary thought!

There is so much God knows and understands about us and about our circumstances that we will never begin to understand. As I look across this congregation, I know that many of you can give testimony of how adversity has been a means by which your faith in God has grown. Some can tell of difficult struggles with disease or a heart attack. Others can speak of lost jobs, failed marriages, or major financial set-backs. There are those here who would say they probably would not be following Christ today if it were not for some disaster they went through. Difficulties are an important means of spiritual growth. And countless times as a pastor, people have told me, "That terrible time (be it cancer, divorce, or other problems) was actually one of the best things that ever happened to me. In going through that, I received a priceless gift— a deeper faith, trust, and greater intimacy with God than I ever dreamed possible."

That is why Paul says in Rom 5:3-5,

*...we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.*

Our bodies and all the things of this world are only for this life. But character is eternal. If losing a bit of what we sometimes refer to as “the quality of life” here— something that lasts for only a few years— can give us a gift that will bless us for all of eternity, isn’t that a good thing? When we see things from eternity’s vantage point, I believe we’ll be thankful some of our desperate prayers for deliverance from adversity went unanswered when we realize what God accomplished in us through them.

How do we know the good gifts to ask for? Scripture, God’s unchanging Word, is a window through which we begin to understand. In another promise, Jesus says, *“If you ask anything in my name, I will do it”* (Jn. 14:14). “In my name” means consistent with Jesus’ character, will, personality, and purposes. We get to know that through saturation with His Word revealed in Scripture. Rev. Robert Murray McCeyne wrote to a young confirmand this timeless advice: “Turn your Bible into prayer.”

Also, the Holy Spirit can communicate God’s will to us directly. Luke identifies this same teaching of Jesus about asking, seeking, and knocking with a teaching on the Holy Spirit as the good gift Jesus promises (Lk. 11:13). All good gifts, of course, come through the Spirit. But also, the Spirit guides our prayers to know the best things to be praying for. So, here is an admonition to seek God through Scripture and through the Holy Spirit He gives in response to our asking. We let Him guide, refine, and purify our askings, seekings, and knockings until they reflect the good thing He is doing. Then we will receive.

## **OBEDIENCE**

There is one final consideration here in this teaching. It is interesting that the Golden Rule occurs here, in this context,

*So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you,  
for this sums up the Law and the Prophets. (12)*

The implications are two-fold. First, because God is so generous in giving us good gifts, we should likewise share our blessings with others. Second, this calls for obedience— doing what God calls us to do. It means we are willing to be a part of the answer to prayer. If you are praying for help for a friend, maybe you are part of that help and need to get involved in a practical way. Or, in praying for someone’s salvation, are you willing to be used of God as a witness? By placing the Golden Rule in this context of prayer, Jesus is telling us that prayer often will guide us into action, to doing. And as we consider what that action might be, Jesus gives us an amazingly simple way to figure it out: consult your own self-interest. What would you like in that situation?

So, in the midst of asking, seeking, and knocking we need to think seriously about if we've

obeyed God in what He's saying to us. Prayer often leads us to action, taking Spirit-directed action.

Bruce Wilkinson, who began a “Dream for Africa” project with volunteers going there to serve, tells about an old African woman who trusted in God’s power to help her care for 56 orphans. She lived in a tiny mud hut. On the final day of their visit, the “Dream for Africa” volunteers came to her home and found a number of garden plots already dug up, but nothing growing in them. The volunteers were surprised to see this and learned that earlier that day, this woman had told the children to go out and dig lots of gardens. When the children asked her why, since they had neither seeds nor money, she said, “Last night I asked God to send someone to plant gardens for us. We must be ready for them when they come.” And that day, “Dream for Africa” volunteers showed up with hundreds of ready-to-plant seedlings.

In a story like that, I see a wonderful combination of prayer and the Golden Rule. These “Dream for Africa” volunteers had, through prayer, caught a vision of doing for others what they would want done for them if they were hopelessly mired in poverty in Africa. They then obeyed in doing what God called them to do. This old African grandmother, responding to God’s call, took in 56 orphans for which she had no material resources to care for, and gave them the most important gift of all, love and an understanding of the love of Christ. She trusted God to be able to use her obedience to provide for them. The kind of faith she lived on is seen in her getting the gardens ready for planting simply in response to a promise from God, before she knew of any way to get plants or seeds.

## CONCLUSION

This simple promise is meant to be breath-taking in its implications. But, while it is simple, it is not in the least superficial. It is meant to lead us into the very heart and will of God. Prayer becomes the adventure of discovering the good work God is doing in us and shaping our living into His perfect ways. And, we discover the thrill of cooperating with Him in the work He is doing in others.

Let's abandon all our lazy, half-hearted, ignorant askings and let them be refined into what His perfect love desires for us and our world. This is a call to not let disappointment or frustration in prayer become defeat or despair. Instead, let all that isn't answered be a call to press in deeper so we can know the heart of God and the **good gifts**– the **best gifts**– He is so eager to give.