

Praying--Ask the Father

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Prayer Series #3

Matthew 7:7-12

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Dear friends in Christ,

Pretend with me that you have no idea how to tune up your car. For most of us, that won't take much imagination. We take our car to the mechanic because we have no idea how to do that. So you've got to tune up your car. It hasn't been running the best so it's time. Jesus comes up to you and says, "Your car needs a tune up. Here's the parts and tools. Now go to it." You stop and stare at the car and the parts. But you have no idea where to start. You've got a large bottle titled engine oil, another one of Washer Fluid, one marked antifreeze and another transmission oil. There's a set of funny looking things called spark plugs and couple of round filters. You touch them all and read the labels but you have no clue where to start and where to put these different fluids you've been given by Jesus. Then as you are starting to feel overwhelmed, he says, "And don't sweat it. If you need anything—anything at all—to get the job done, just ask me and I'll get you what you need. I'm here for you. Just ask!"

When someone asks the world of you and then offers to help you with everything, that's great! Right?

Now go with me to Galilee as we sit with Jesus while he gives this Sermon on the Mount. For the equivalent of two chapters in the book of Matthew, Jesus has been talking about following him. You want to be his disciple? Great! This is what it looks like... Flip your Bibles back to Matthew 5. Jesus gives the Beatitudes first.

You'll be happy if you have a humble spirit because that's what life is like in the kingdom of God. He goes on from there to talk about things that bless our lives. But as the list continues, he talks about suffering or being persecuted because you want to do God's will. That sounds a little shocking. But by v.12 he assures us that it'll all be worth it when we get to heaven.

Then he says, "'You are the light of the world.' I need you to shine for people to see what a difference I make in your life." And he just keeps rattling on like us preachers can do at times 😊. Remember the 10 commandments that God gave Israel. They were good but I want you to take them to a whole new level. Of course you shouldn't kill your brother but I'm saying you can kill his spirit with words. So don't do that. And you know the seventh commandment against adultery. That's also important but when you look at someone lustfully, that's adultery too. And I'm raising the bar on divorce. And on oaths and revenge. You have to start loving your enemies."

Now we're at the end of chapter 5 and you're already feeling heavy. If I would go through chapter 6, you'd probably feel even more discouraged as the list of new and fuller understandings of the law of God grows. Then chapter 7 starts by saying "don't be looking down on anybody else." And, indeed, I think you see by now that you have enough problems of your own! You've got enough work to do on yourself, just trying to

get in a place where you'll make a difference for God in this world, where a little bit of light will shine through you in the world of darkness.

That, says Jesus, is what I'm calling my disciples to do.

So you try to catch your breath on the hillside. You're thinking about walking away from Jesus now. About getting off the mount and going back to your home; forgetting about Jesus. This guy's standards are impossible. You don't know where to start, never mind even succeeding at one of those lifestyle changes. But then, as if he reads your mind, he says, "But I'll help you do all this stuff. Just ask. Tell me what you need and it's yours!"

That's our text. "Ask and you will receive." It has general application for everything in life but, in its context, I think you can see here that Jesus is offering us all the help needed to achieve the blessedness or happiness of life in his kingdom. Life finds its fulness in living as Jesus directs. So to be his disciple, to be one who follows Jesus, prayer is absolutely essential. Ask God for what you need because you can't do it without him.

Ask the Father

Remember, we are called to ask the Father. However, when it comes to asking for what you need, I can think of two things that get in the way.

Hindrances

The first is that **we don't think we deserve what we're asking for**. We have a big view of sin. And quite frankly, so does Jesus. He says right in our Bible reading, for example, "If you, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children...." So he's acknowledging that sin is real. It has damaged our nature. We now have a sinful nature. Even sweet little Anneke has that. Sarah and Steve aren't going to have to teach her how to be selfish or greedy. It's in her. It's in us all.

When we understand our sinful nature, sometimes it leads us to think that we aren't worthy of God's goodness to us. So we don't ask him for anything. We just muddle along in life and try to make things work in our own steam. We might look back on the things Jesus talked about in the earlier part of the Sermon and figure, for example, that our marriage fell apart so God's not happy with us. Now there's no point in asking God to help us with our children or anything else. Or we might know that we have perverted thoughts regularly, and Jesus isn't happy about that since we're breaking the adultery commandment with our mind. So we don't ask for help because we're embarrassed by our sin. Or maybe you're old and think you haven't done enough for the Lord in all of your years, so you don't deserve to receive anything from him. We think a lot of wrong things when it comes to not doing what Jesus says when he says, "Ask, seek and knock."

But let me ask you, in light of how Jesus speaks in this lesson, Do you think your parents would ever withhold good from you because they consider you to be too wicked? I'm not saying that they haven't withheld something from you for a time as a form of discipline. Like, "No Nintendo tonight because you've been fighting with your sister." This is different than that. Your parents would not say, "Well, my child is a sinner and continues to disappoint me so I'm turning a deaf ear toward her every request. That's how we sometimes operate. We figure that we're not good enough for God to listen to our prayers. We've failed him too many times or even just one time in a really serious way.

Friends, our Lord Jesus says his Father delights to give good gifts to us. So we ought to ask and not hide behind our sin. We want the blessings of God's kingdom, the joy of life lived for Jesus, the power of a disciple's life in Christ. Then, ask the Father!

A second reason for not asking is that **we don't think our need is worth praying about**. God is a big God and he has the whole world to deal with. There are people dying and reeling in the aftermath of recent hurricanes and cyclones. There's war in Syria. There are Christian brothers and sisters being persecuted in various parts of the world. Certainly our problems pale in comparison and God has bigger fish to fry. We know we can ask, but we don't. Our issues are too small to bother God for help.

Maybe that was born in us by something people said to us. As a child we cried about things and our Dad said, "Stop it or I'll give you something to cry about!" I've said that to my kids and probably shouldn't have! Now when we are downhearted, we just suck it up and move ahead. We don't think to pray. Maybe a teacher said, "Don't ask dumb questions. Figure it out yourself!" And now that's what we still do when we feel stuck. We don't bother God. We muddle around until we come to some solution on our own.

Friends, I like what one author said about this: "it would be a shame to tone down one of the most sparkling and generous sets of promises anywhere in the Bible. Maybe it isn't 'selfish' to ask for things. Maybe it's just the natural thing that children are supposed to do with parents. Maybe our refusal to do so actually makes God sad or puzzled: why aren't his children telling him how it is for them, what they'd like him to do for them? Of course, generosity of spirit is easily abused.... But, for most of us, the problem is not that we are too eager to ask for the wrong things. The problem is that we are not nearly eager enough to ask for the right things." (NT Wright).

God is our Father, dear people. And he wants to hear from us. Not because he doesn't know what we need but because he wants to hear us calling on him; he's about wanting to build a stronger relationship with us. He wants us to see how good he is—how loving, gentle and wise. That's the goal of the Father. He loves to hear us ask him for what we need.

Ask for What We Need

And what are we to ask for? What are the things to pray for? Well, whatever you feel you need. That's what our Father in heaven wants to hear us asking about. Jesus' point is that if human fathers and mothers want to give good things to their children, then God Almighty our heavenly Father wants to give us all we need and then some. As a father, I love to give gifts to my children. I'm probably going to be even more generous with our children after almost losing Rachel last March. Life is precious, and time is precious. So I will do what I can do to help my family.

God, by comparison, can do everything and therefore the Heidelberg Catechism says we should pray for everything we need for body and soul as taught by Jesus in the Lord's Prayer. (LD 45). So go ahead. Ask the Father. Ask boldly and confidently. He loves to hear from us.

Rest in the Father's Answer

God answers every prayer. But the way to understand that is by remembering Jesus big point in this reading that God is our Father. He answers us as a good Father who knows our needs better than we know them ourselves. That's Jesus' point about God being a Father who gives good gifts to his children in a way that exceeds human fathers. God knows everything about us and gives us what is best. Not always what we ask for at a particular time and place. No, he answers as a wise and loving Father.

Years ago, I was in my first congregation as a pastor. Things were going reasonably well but I was restless and thinking it was time for a change. I was in Ontario and I had an inquiry from a church in southern Alberta that really excited me. I had been praying faithfully up to that time for God's leading. And even more so, I felt like I was in a really good place with God. I felt like I was close to him and hearing his voice in my heart as I waited for his leading. This inquiry seemed to me to be God's answer to my prayers. As the weeks went by and the chats with the search committee continued, I became more and more convinced that this was going to be God's call for me. I'd like to tell you the whole story but, in short, what happened is that the church called someone else and he accepted. So God answered my prayer with a no. I was distraught and confused. And, honestly, for several years after that, I doubted the whole idea of listening to God in prayer. I still prayed but it was not with the same passion and confidence.

Looking back at that situation a few years later, I realized that while I was desperately trying to be in step with God, as my Father he was doing something more important in my life. He had things for me to learn—things that would help me grow as his child in ways that wouldn't happen if I moved to a new church. He was answering my prayers to be a stronger, more faithful child of God and disciple of Jesus. But it was learning through perseverance and patience before the Lord led me to another church a few years later. That time of waiting and learning is something that I wouldn't trade for the world now. It's been something that I've been able to share with many young pastors over the years as well. I ask my Father for what I believe is needed. But then I must trust him to answer me according to his wise and perfect plan for my life. I've had to learn to

trust him for the right answers. And I'm still learning that every day. But I do know he is my good Father who always has my best interests in mind and has ways of accomplishing good things in my life that I would never have imagined!

Clearly Jesus is not saying that we can ask for whatever we want and we will receive it. His Father is not our Santa Claus. He's a loving, wise, almighty and gracious heavenly Father who answers our prayers so that we do indeed receive, but not always exactly what we ask for. We get what is best for us and for the kingdom of God. In fact, I dare say today that there are times in our lives when we look back on what we asked for and we're thankful that God didn't give it to us. We see in hindsight that what we thought we wanted wasn't really good for us. That's why our eyes need to be on the kingdom of God and asking God for whatever will be best for us as servants in his kingdom. That's the kind of answer that Jesus expected to receive and rested in when he prayed. Remember how our Lord agonized in prayer before his crucifixion ending with, "Your will be done." That's because Jesus was set on seeking God's kingdom, not his own comfort. And because of his sacrifice we receive grace, including access to God through prayer.

By God's grace, as the Holy Spirit works in us and we learn to listen and trust, we set our hearts more and more on the things that God has in store for us and the world. Then we pray more and more for the things of the kingdom of God. "Lord, use me for to be a better servant for my neighbours—employees, friends, coworkers and bosses, people on my street and in my building, those on my team and in my school. And those across the world. Lord, shape my desires to become like yours. Give me eyes to see the world like you do. Lord, use our church to show your glory in our community. Lord, protect us from Satan's snares in our society." In short, when we think about Jesus' words "Ask and your will receive" in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, we see that it's all about praying for the kingdom of God. And, yes, our personal needs and desires are part of that. The Lord puts specific things on our hearts.

So as we pray and grow in faith, we also learn to rest in the Father's answer. Our unworthiness is not an issue. We are made worthy to be God's children and to be heard by him because of what Jesus has done for us. Therefore we pray confidently—expecting to receive an answer. And we pray humbly, knowing that the Father's answer will be best for us and for his kingdom. We are not in this kingdom-living, Jesus-following life by ourselves. The Father is on our side, promising we'll receive his good answers to our prayers.