

## **Persisting in Prayer**

### *Matthew 7:7-11*

If there is one question that is sure to make many of us not feel so great about our spiritual lives, it's the question, "How's your prayer life?" For many of us when we hear that question we have a sense that it could and should be better. Well, here's the deal . . . we are going to talk about prayer this morning and my hope is that instead of this being a time that makes you feel worse about how you are doing in this area that it would be a time that would breathe life into your prayer life. My hope is that this would be a time in which God Himself encourages you to move to a deeper experience of prayer.

In fact, let me encourage you to do something even right now as we begin our time. Ask God to encourage you through this time in His Word. Ask God to speak to your heart about this issue of prayer. Ask Him to take you to a deeper experience of persisting in prayer.

This morning we are looking at Matthew 7:7-11. This is the third time in the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus addresses the issue of prayer. At the heart of what He does here, he issues a grand invitation.

### **I. A Grand Invitation: Ask and You Shall Receive (Matthew 7:7-8)**

Jesus says:

*<sup>7</sup> "Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. <sup>8</sup> "For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it shall be opened.*

*Ask . . . seek . . . knock.* All three of these words speak of the same activity of prayer. All three are present tense imperatives meaning that Jesus is commanding us to keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking. He is calling us to persist in prayer.

*Ask* is a general term for making any type of request. It is not specially a term limited to prayer, but without a doubt that is what Jesus is talking about here. He commands his followers to keep on asking and he says *it shall be given to you*. It is a command with a promise.

To *seek* suggests that there is real sincerity in the heart of the one making the request. There is an attitude of seeking and searching. It is a heart that is coming to God, honestly looking for Him to do something. Keep on seeking, Jesus says, *and you shall find*.

And we are commanded to keep on knocking. In the same that way a person might stand outside a literal door and keep knocking until someone comes and answers the door, so Jesus wants his followers to have a diligent persistence in prayer. Keep at it. Keep praying. If you do keep knocking, Jesus says, *it shall be opened for you*.

In verse 8, Jesus makes it clear that this grand invitation is not just for the twelve disciples or the larger group listening to him. He goes on in verse 8 to say:

*<sup>8</sup> "For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it shall be opened."*

*Everyone who asks receives. Everyone who seeks finds. Everyone who knocks it shall be opened.* It is an amazing promise of prayer extended to all of Jesus' followers. This is a promise for us just as much as it was for the twelve disciples.

Do we believe it? Do you believe it? Do I believe it?

In my experience, it seems that when new Christians first encounter this passage their reaction is often, "Wow, this is an amazing promise!" They simply take it at face value and begin to pray in big ways. They begin to ask God for things that are on their heart. They simply have the faith of a child that says, "If Jesus make this promise it must be true and I'm going to take action on it."

But then, over time as this person grows and matures a couple of things can tend to happen. First, he rightly learns that Scripture must be interpreted in light of all Scripture. He learns that this prayer promise rightly needs to be understood in light of other things that are taught in the Bible. For instance, 1 John 5:14-15 says:

*<sup>14</sup> And this is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. <sup>15</sup> And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him.*

And so he learns that what he prays should be according to God's will. And this is true, but subtly what happens for many believers is that this promise is qualified and qualified to the point where it doesn't really mean much anymore.

Or, there is another thing that can happen sometimes. This promise is taken at face value and a believer does pray for things, but when she does not receive what she asked for there is disappointment and, with a disappointed heart, she begins to say to herself that it apparently doesn't mean what she thought it meant because God did not answer her prayer.

And so, over time for one reason or another, far too many believers simply stop acting on this grand invitation. It does not ring true with their experience or they have simply qualified it away to the point that they stop asking, they stop seeking, they stop knocking. They stop boldly asking God for the things that are on their heart.

Does any of this ring true in your experience? I think the easiest way to see what you believe about this promise is to look at your prayer life. Are there things that you are asking for from God? Are you asking, seeking, knocking?

Let me illustrate it this way. Suppose you read in the paper this week, "Free: All expense trip to NCAA Final Four; package includes travel, accommodations, food and four tickets to all games. All you need to do to receive this deal is to call such and such company and ask." If you are someone who would love to go to the Final Four, how would I know whether you believed that ad or not? Well, if you called or not. If you truly wanted to go and you believed this deal was true, you'd call. If you didn't call it would indicate that you really didn't believe it.

God extends to us an amazing invitation concerning prayer. Do you believe it? Are you asking; are you seeking; are you knocking? Are you persisting in prayer for things that are on your heart? Are there specific things that you can name for which you are actually persisting with God in prayer? If not, there is a good chance that you really don't believe what Jesus says here.

My hope today is that God will help each one of us engage this prayer promise afresh. My hope is that we will believe it and respond to this grand invitation and enter into persistent, believing prayer.

The pathway there, I believe, in light of what Jesus says next, is not by just by trying harder, but by understanding better what God is like. It is really in a better understanding of what God is like that we find a great motivation for persisting in prayer.

## **II. A Great Motivation: God Gives What is Good (Matthew 7:9-11)**

Starting in verse 9, Jesus presents an illustration from real life to help us understand what God is like. Verse nine begins with the connective, *Or*. You see this in the text of the NASB. The NIV does not translate it however. The sense of this connective is, "to put the matter another way."

Jesus says,

*<sup>9</sup> "Or what man is there among you, when his son shall ask him for a loaf, will give him a stone? <sup>10</sup> "Or if he shall ask for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he?"*

These are both rhetorical questions to which the clear answer is, "No one." No normal parent when asked for a loaf of bread by a son will give him a stone. No parent, if a child should ask for a fish, would give that child a snake. Earthly parents are naturally disposed to give good things to their children.

And then Jesus says this:

<sup>11</sup> *"If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!"*

Jesus calls the race of mankind, *evil*. He is stating a theological truth that is affirmed over and over again in the New Testament (e.g. Rom. 3:23). Mankind is sinful. To say this does not mean that we are as bad as we can possibly be, but it does mean that we are totally affected by sin. We are self-centered; not God-centered and this reality taints all that we do (*EBC*, Carson, 187). And yet, Jesus says, that even though this is true, you still *know how to give good gifts to your children*.

And then Jesus presents a contrast: *How much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!* If parents, who are sinful, have hearts to give what is good to their children, how much more is it true that our heavenly Father, who is wholly good, shall have a heart not only to give, but to give what is good to His children.

Going back to my earlier illustration about the Free Final Four deal . . . my guess is that for most of us, if we read that ad for this free deal, we wouldn't believe it. It sounds too good to be true. If, however, we found out that it was sponsored by a local company that we knew was reputable and trustworthy, we would be much more inclined to believe the offer and act upon it and call. In other words, your actions would be shaped by what you believe about the one making the offer.

Our prayer lives are going to be shaped by what we believe to be true about God. And what Jesus is telling us is true about God is that He is a faithful, heavenly Father whose character it is to want to give to His children and to give what is good. That's who God is. You can count on it. This is the truth that we need to allow to motivate us to enter into persistent prayer.

Many of you know that one of the areas of vision that we are praying that God would develop in our church is a deepening experience of prayer. Part of how this part of our vision is expressed goes like this:

*We desire for every member to have a rich, growing life of prayer.*

This invitation to ask, seek and knock is certainly part of this rich life of prayer. This morning, my hope is that even if you have read this passage a thousand times that you will hear it with the ears and heart of a child and that you will take God at His Word and enter into this grand invitation and pray knowing that God loves to give good things. I hope this morning that all of us have been reminded that God is not a stingy stranger from whom we coerce an occasional answered prayer. He's not like that.

My hope for all of us this morning is that we would simply take Jesus at His word and begin to pray boldly for the things that are on our hearts. Why wouldn't we in light of this invitation? Why wouldn't we in light of what God is like?

Yes, we need to understand this passage in light of all that Scripture teaches on prayer. We do need to seek to discern God's will and pray according to it. We should not think that we can just willy-nilly ask for whatever and God will give whatever we ask. But let's not qualify this passage away to where it doesn't really mean at all what it seems to clearly say. Let's believe what Jesus says and enter into persistent prayer.

Now, I know that some of you have prayed persistently for years for something that as best you can tell seems to be God's will and something that is good and yet God has not answered your prayer. And you've experienced disappointment with God. You wonder why God makes this promise and yet it seems that He is not following through? Obviously, we don't have the time to do justice to that question today, but let me make a couple of comments.

First, there will always be mystery in prayer. Maybe God's understanding of what is good in the thing that you are praying is different than yours. We are not infinitely wise; God is. Or maybe He simply hasn't answered yet. As we've talked this morning the command is to keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on praying. For some reason, God may want you to continue to persist in your prayer for this thing knowing that your persisting is good thing. Maybe there is something that God is working into your life through your continued prayers for this issue. God cares about what you are praying for, but He also cares about you and His relationship with you and there may be a good reason for His delay. And so, let me encourage you to not give up hope, but to keep persisting in your request.

My challenge to all of us, in light of what Jesus says here, is that we would simply take Jesus at His word and begin or continue to pray boldly for the things that are on our hearts. As we come to the end of our time let me make four comments that may help guide you as you think about this.

First, trust God to shape what you pray for. Don't allow the understanding that you should pray according to His will to paralyze you. Rather, just start praying what is on your heart and trust that God will guide you and change how you pray to more and more be in alignment with His will.

Second, pray boldly knowing that you can trust God to only give you what is good. This should be a very freeing thing to us because it means that we don't have to have the wisdom to figure out if all that we pray for is truly good before we start praying it. We can trust God to sort it all out and give what is good. I know in my life, not everything I've ever asked for has been good. I might have thought so at the time, but later I'm so thankful God did not answer according to how I prayed. We can pray boldly knowing that God will sort it all out and give us what is good.

Third, we should always acknowledge that God's ways are not our ways. He knows what is truly good; we do not in many cases. And so because of this there will always

be mystery in prayer. It won't always work in the way that we think it should. But don't let the mystery keep you from pursuing the invitation that Jesus gives us here.

My final comment is this: start praying persistently for those things that clearly are God's will. For instance, there are all sorts of things that we've seen as we've studied the Sermon on the Mount that are clearly God's will. We've seen that God wants us to be humble in spirit (5:3), to be gentle (5:5), to hunger and thirst for righteousness (5:6), to be merciful (5:7), to be pure in heart (5:8), to be peacemakers (5:9). We've seen in other places that we are to live as salt and light in this world (5:13-16). We are to be honest people whose yes means yes and our no means no (6:33-37). We are to be people who love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (5:43-48). We are not to be hypocritical (6:5). We are not to be anxious people worried about the necessities of life, but rather we are to be people who seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness (6:25-34). We are to be people who do not judge (7:1-5).

Any of these things would be great places to start. We can ask, and seek and knock knowing that God will answer because these are according to God's will.

One of the insights that came to me this week is that this is really what I need to do in response to things I've seen in the Sermon on the Mount. My tendency when I hear that, for instance, I'm not to worry about the basic necessities of life is to simply try harder not to worry. It is so easy for me to make it a kind of self-improvement project for me. It was freeing for me this week to realize that what Jesus is saying to me in this passage is that if I want to have this worry-free life that is oriented around God's kingdom first, then I should ask for it, seek for it, keep knocking on the throne room of heaven for it and God will answer and give this good thing.

Well, as we close, I want to give you a few moments to simply talk to God about what we've looked at this morning. Let me encourage you to have an honest conversation with Him about your prayer life. Maybe there is prayerlessness that needs to be confessed. Do that. Maybe there is a need to ask Him to help you believe this promise at a heart level. Do that. Ask Him to develop within you a persistent, deepening experience of prayer. And then finally, you will notice at the bottom of your outline that you have a box with the words, "With the help of God, I will persist in prayer for . . . ." Ask God if there is something that He would want you to commit to persistent prayer. Let me encourage you to write it down and then begin to pray about it.

Amen.