

## A Loving Father's Invitation

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### *Matthew 7:7-11*

Today begins a sermon series called Finding God. This series supplements our 21 days of prayer and fasting, which begins tomorrow and ends on Sunday, January 26<sup>th</sup>. The goal of this is to provide an opportunity for each of us to begin the year seeking God in ways that might set the pace for the rest of the year. We've asked each of you who plan to participate to let us know by marking the box on the back of the connection card. This serves two purposes. When you check that box you'll receive in an email a document that will help guide you in what to do over these 21 days. Fasting can be done several different ways, and that document will outline options for you. We have hard copies at the welcome desk for you to pick up as well. You'll also receive in an email prayer opportunities that will be happening around the city over the 21 days that you can participate in. Second, our hope is that in checking the box you will actually commit yourself to participating. Sometimes actually checking a box helps us say "yes," I'm in.

During our time here today and over the next three Sundays we will be exploring what God says in His Word about seeking Him, and ultimately finding Him. If your immediate response to the idea of 21 days of prayer and fasting was absolute dread, I want to encourage you that you are in good company. To be honest, I actually first resisted the idea of fasting. Prayer, sure, I can do that. But fasting? I honestly had a hard time getting excited about it.

And then that all began to change as I began studying the passage that we will read today. As I've studied this passage this week I've become more and more amazed that this passage is actually in the Bible. Seriously, it amazes me that Jesus Christ actually said these words. Today's passage is Matthew 7:7-11. My hope this morning is to do exactly what Jesus intended when He originally spoke these words. I want to paint a picture of a God so good and so eager to bless us that to not seek Him would actually sound ridiculous to us. It would be unfathomable for us to not seek God. I believe that if we truly take Jesus at His words, we can actually look at these 21 days of prayer and fasting as an opportunity that is simply too good to pass up. So before you check out on this sermon because you heard the word "fasting", let's look at what Jesus has to say to us in regards to how we seek God. Let's read:

<sup>7</sup> "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. <sup>8</sup> For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. <sup>9</sup> Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? <sup>10</sup> Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? <sup>11</sup> 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

now much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

Let's pray. Lord, I'm amazed by these words. Your Word is perfect and enduring, and I find it remarkable that this promise was spoken by Jesus in the greatest sermon ever preached. Help us, Holy Spirit to have the vision you intend for us to seek you and find you in ways we never have before. We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.

Over the next three weeks we are going to look at three primary ways outlined in Scripture for how we ask, seek, and knock. It is through prayer, fasting, and God's Word that gives us focus and intensity to our asking, seeking, and knocking. Through prayer we bring our cares before the Lord and express our deepest longings and desires. Through fasting we humble ourselves and remind ourselves of our deepest, truest need, God. Through the Word of God we gain wisdom to ask God according to His will and seek Him in a way that is in line with His heart.

Today we will focus on the why.

Jesus says in verse 7:

<sup>7</sup> "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.

So why does Jesus tell us to ask, seek, and knock? Is there any real significance in coming to God in these ways? When I got to verses 9 and 10 regarding a father and his son, I couldn't help but think of my own son.

I have a son who is going to turn 1 on Friday. His name is Bearit, and he's amazing. Bearit is in the prime season of his life for this incredible game that we love to play often. The game is called peekaboo. Now here is the premise of how peekaboo works. It's a complicated game so I'm going to explain how to play for you in detail.

First, Bearit needs to see dad. Usually we are playing on the floor together. He has a visual reference for where I am. He sees me. Then, all of a sudden, in a swift turn of events, dad disappears. Maybe I put my hands in front of my face, or hide behind a couch. Either way, Bear no longer knows where dad is. Now, it is at this point where tension is introduced in the game of peekaboo. There is an unresolved conflict. I was there one second, and now I'm not. Bear is aware that I am around, but doesn't know where I have gone. He's looking for me and knows I'm close, but doesn't know where I am. And here is where it gets really exciting. All of a sudden, I show up again! Bear sees me, and I see Bear, and there is this exuberant laughter and joy at the result of finding one another. It's seriously the best thing ever. Bear laughs. I laugh. We both light up with joy. And it was so good that we actually continue to play it 80 more times!

Now, there are two underlying assumptions that need to happen for a successful game of peekaboo. First, Bear needs to seek me. It is

imperative in the game of peekaboo that Bearit wants to find Dad. He has to want to find me. If this is removed, it completely throws off the whole premise of the game. If I disappear and Bear is like, "Pssh...whatever, I didn't need that guy anyway," it totally removes the element of suspense.

Second, I want to be found. If we are downstairs in our living room and I may hide behind one of our chairs. But I will poke out my foot ever so slightly so that Bear can easily find me. And this isn't to manipulate Bear and play tricks with him. I actually want to be found! If I hide behind a door, I cannot wait for Bear to pump his fists on the door so that I can open it and we can enjoy the thrill of finding each other.

I know it is an imperfect metaphor. But here is my point. God wants something so much better and deeper in his relationship with you. God wants to experience with you the joy of being sought after, and ultimately found. God wants you to ask him, to seek him, and to knock. Why?

God Wants to Give. God Wants to be Found. God Wants to Open the Door.

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He loves you and is more than willing to give you good things if you seek him. We seek God because God wants relationship with us. Jesus is not telling us that the only way to get God's attention here is to bother him with endless requests so as to annoy Him enough to get what we want. That is another parable. He wants a deep level of intimacy with you and me.

In verse 8 Jesus reiterates his point further:

<sup>8</sup> For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.

Is Jesus just trying to give us some superficial excuse to pray? Does Jesus really expect us to believe what He is saying here? Could it actually be that God responds when we seek Him? Absolutely!

Prayer and fasting is not some formality God came up with to simply keep us busy with something to do. We pray, we read the Scriptures, and we fast because we believe that we have a God who actually does stuff as a result of our seeking. This is Jesus' point! God responds. God answers. God moves.

God doesn't want wishy washy prayers! He isn't interested in halfhearted devotion. Jesus is inviting us to ask, seek, and knock, with specificity and longing with the expectation that we will receive what we ask for! It really is possible. We will find what we are seeking! And when we knock, the door will be opened! God is waiting. But we have to do our part and come to Him.

Now if you read this passage by itself, it will be easy to walk away with the idea that God is some genie in a bottle. We get three wishes, and

idea that God is some genie in a bottle. We get three wishes, and whatever we want, it will be given to us. That would be a grievous error on our part. We interpret scripture in light of scripture, and nowhere else in the bible do we see a God who is some juke box that spits out whatever we want.

Jesus is not promoting a prosperity Gospel here. I'd like to suggest today that Jesus is actually addressing our passivity. For you and me our default condition is passivity. Apathy. Disengagement. We've been avoiding God ever since the garden. Nowhere in the Bible will you ever see God telling us, "Listen ya'll, you are a little overzealous for me. Your eagerness to seek my face is actually quite overwhelming and I'm going to ask you to take it down a notch". No! Absolutely not! Jesus is saying these words with the underlying assumption that we've already got passivity and apathy figured out. We've checked that box! But what is He saying?

Jesus is encouraging us to come to Him and to never stop. He wants us to come to Him with the expectation that when we seek, God can actually be found. It really is that good. There is no game or gimmick. No manipulation here. God is not tricking us. All of these imperatives, ask, seek, and knock, are said in the present tense, indicating that they were meant to be done in an ongoing fashion. We are never supposed to stop asking, seeking, and knocking. Every single day we are called to come to Him! Why? Because God gives. He reveals. He opens. How much will we forfeit in this life if we don't ask!?

Many of you are probably asking the obvious question, "Why, when I ask for something good, does God not give it?" Many of us have been asking for good things that have not been given to us. We've asked for healing from cancer and not received it. We've asked for pregnancy in the midst of infertility and have not been given it. We have asked for a job, and are still waiting. The list can go on and on. These are all good things right? In short, I don't know. Those are important questions for an entire different sermon. At risk of oversimplifying, one suggestion is that I think it may be because God has a greater purpose. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed that the cup of suffering be removed from Him. God did not answer Him this request. But what does Jesus say at the end, "Your will be done" (Matthew 26:39). Sometimes we withhold something good from our children so that they experience something far better.

But here is what we do know. Jesus encourages us to ask, seek, and knock, not so we simply get whatever we want, but because of this reality....**GOD IS AN INCREDIBLE FATHER.** He is so good that you and I don't even have a category in our minds for His goodness. Here is what Jesus says in verse nine through eleven:

<sup>9</sup> Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? <sup>10</sup> Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? <sup>11</sup> 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!

In an attempt to drive home the goodness of God, Jesus compares our heavenly Father with our earthly fathers. He says that we, even though we are marred by sin, know how to give good gifts to our children. If this is the case, how much more will our heavenly father, who is perfect, delight to give us good things!

### God's Goodness is the Anchor for Our Asking, Seeking, and Knocking

If we don't get the character of God right, why come to Him? Seriously, if God is irritable and easily agitated, why does any of this matter? If God does not know when it is best to give and when it is best to withhold, why come to him? But there is good news! God is not aloof, He is not absent, or indifferent, or too distracted running the world. Our prayers do not fall on deaf ears!

God is infinitely more good than our minds can fathom. In verses nine through eleven Jesus is helping us see God for who he truly is, a loving, beautiful father. Through Jesus Christ, we have a heavenly Father who knows exactly what we need, and...it gets better, He longs to give it to us, we just need to ask him! Jesus is not pushing people toward obedience through harsh commands, but Jesus is drawing people toward obedience through the goodness of God. Take heart today, God is eager to give good to you. Goodness is in His nature. God does not have to try to be good like you and me, He simply is good. We don't need to question His intentions. When we ask for something we don't receive, we aren't worried. Why? He has our best interest in mind. We are at peace.

Now I want to acknowledge that for some of us in this room you have had horrible earthly fathers. Abusive fathers. Neglecting fathers. Jesus doesn't call us "evil" in verse eleven for no reason. We are evil. Our earthly fathers, though sinful, should love their wives and children. We see this command explicitly in Ephesians 5 and 6. Jesus is saying that in general, most fathers know how to give good things to their children. If I, wicked as I am, know how to bless my son, how much more will a God who is perfect in every way want to give good to us?

Last Sunday Pastor Sam asked us this question, "What would it mean if you defined yourself each day first and foremost by the grace of God?" In other words, what if the grace of God is what defined you? This question is one that I've been wrestling with all week long. There is an area of my life that I feel God has been wanting me to address for some time now. I've sort of avoided it to be honest, and haven't really been intentional about putting it on the table for Him and I to deal with together. The sin is self-pity. I really struggle with self-pity. I'll be doing fine one moment and then one thing will throw me off and I way too easily spiral down into this sin of self-contempt. I feel sorry for myself.

I have a good friend who said this, "self-pity is satanic". When I first heard that, I sort of balked at it. I mean, that seems a little harsh don't you

think? But at closer examination and guidance from the Holy Spirit, I think he is absolutely right. Because Jesus' death on the cross was the ultimate display of my self-worth. Though I do not deserve it, Jesus considered my life so worth it that He chose to give His own life for mine. Why? So I could mope around in self-pity at the first sign of suffering? No! Absolutely not! The cross of Christ completely eradicates any need for self-pity in my life. When I choose to live in self-pity, I am telling Jesus that his death on the cross was a waste of His time.

So as I've wrestled with what it looks like to be defined by the grace of God, I feel deeply the need to repent of this. And that is what I intend to do over these 21 days of prayer and fasting. Among a couple other things, addressing self-pity with the Gospel of Jesus Christ is going to be high priority for me. I will do this through prayer, fasting, and by reading God's truth about who He says I am. I'm not doing this because I feel like God will be disappointed if I don't. I'm doing this because I believe that my heavenly Father wants so much better for me.

### Communion

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These 21 days are not to be the only days we seek God. We don't stop seeking God on January 26<sup>th</sup>. We are simply setting the pace for the rest of the year. As we come to the Lord's table this morning, my question for you is this, will you seek God with us over these next 21 days? How will you seek him? Where in your life are you desperate for God's intervention? Ask yourself the question: "If God doesn't show up in this area of my life, what will I do?" What is that for you? I want you to think about that as we enter into this time of communion.

Don't pass up this amazing invitation from God. We can ask, seek, and knock with great impudence today, believing that He hears, and He responds out of His goodness.