

It Never Hurts to Just Ask

Matthew 7:7-11

A man was walking down a dark street. He met a rough looking character who said, "Sir, could you help a poor, hungry, homeless man who has nothing in the whole world, except this 38 revolver, which I now hold in my hand." We pray like that at times. Rather than simply ask, we feel we must come to God with a little added something, some bit of leverage, as though prayer is matter of talking God into doing things for us that He's not naturally inclined to do. So, we bring along a really good argument for Him to chew on. Or, we back-load our petition with all sorts of promises about our future performance. We know He loves us. We know that He is a generous Father. We know that He would never do the wrong thing. So, why is it so hard sometimes to just ask and leave it at that?

Sometimes, we ask God for His help in a struggle, because we know that is exactly what we should do, but we are so riddled with anxiety over the matter that we would be shocked if He actually did anything. In Acts 12. Herod executed James, the brother of John and the first of the twelve Apostles to die as a martyr. The Jews were pleased at this, so Herod seized Peter with the identical intent:

⁴After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.

⁵So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. - Acts 12:4,5

The situation seemed hopeless, but the early church prayed and prayed. Perhaps, God would knock some sense into Herod, or public opinion would sway that nut. God had a more direct answer in mind. An angel appeared to Peter. His chains fell off, and the angel guided him right out the iron gates of the prison, which opened before him. What happened next was a bit less divine.

Peter knocked at the house where the church was inside praying. A servant girl named Rhoda went to the door and recognized Peter's voice when he called. She announced to the group, "Peter is at the door" (verse 14). They responded to Rhoda, "You are out of your mind" (verse 15)... "Now get back in here and help us pray for Peter!" It was just too much for that gathering to believe that God would work in such a straightforward way in response to the cries of their heart and in behalf of His servant, Peter. Sometimes, if we will just ask our Father without obsessing so much over how He might answer, how He should answer, or whether we are praying properly, He could surprise us.

Some of us think we are missing something unless we sense something sensationalistic and spiritual with every prayer. But others of us are not so accustomed to the sensational, so we temper our expectations with great practicality. That way we steel ourselves for the disappointment that might come when God doesn't perform on cue. We console ourselves, "He knows what's best, after all." God is our Father, and fathers can be awfully practical, but fathers also get a kick out of generously surprising their children. There are many great passages on prayer in the Bible. The one we are exploring today is such a passage, but it is also a great text to help us see God as our Father.

I. A Perfect Father Can Never Be A Stranger (7,8)

⁷"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ⁸For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

A. In What Tense Do You Pray?

There were two present tenses in Greek, one called present tense, and one called aorist. The present tense is present in time but refers to a continuous action. The aorist tense is present in time, but refers to a single action. In our text, the present tense is used. We might render His words, "Asking, it will be given to you. Keep seeking, you will find. Knocking, the door will be opened to you." Jesus was teaching His disciples to persist in prayer, but I don't think He was talking simply about childish persistence that wears down a parent such as is depicted in *The Simpson's*: "Can I have one?" "No!" "Can I have one?" "No!" "Can I have one?" "No!" "Can I have one?" "Okay!" I believe what Jesus has in mind, rather, is the persistence of authentic trust and established practice.

Consider it this way. Your 16-year-old has a permit to drive. She's done great on back roads. Now, the state has deemed her competent to take to the streets, on the condition that you have the courage to ride in the front seat with her. You instruct her, "Stop when you see a stop sign!" A stop sign appears, and smoothly, like a seasoned driver, she brings the car to a halt. Another stop sign appears, and she rolls through it like it wasn't even there. In response to your scolding, she replies, "You said to stop when I see a stop sign. I did! You didn't say every stop sign." Your intention was present tense. Her response was aorist. She stopped once, but you were hoping for a habit to develop.

Praying from crisis to crisis is aorist. Crisis prayer is by nature selfish, for once the crisis passes, so does the discipline of praying. Aorist is how we interact with strangers on the street, not with our Father. Ongoing prayer - talking to, relying on and walking with the Father is what Jesus desires for us, and that is where the true rewards of prayer are discovered. Pray through an issue until it reaches a resolution. In the process, a deeper relationship with your Father will be forged. Does our persistence mean that God is reluctant to give? Not at all. If we prevail with God after much prayer, it does not mean that we have broken Him down. It means that the Father has drawn us, His children, closer to Himself, and the prayers themselves will probably have begun to reflect that nearness.

B. What Is the Ultimate Object of Kingdom Prayer?

What is it that requires such persistence in asking? This kind of praying is not about the basic needs of life. Our Father knows our needs. So, what are these great quests for which we are to keep asking until we receive, seeking until we find, and knocking until the door opens. Our text is a part of Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount*. He has dropped several hints up to this point as to what is important.

Jesus has reminded His Jewish audience that they had been called to be "the light of the world" and "the salt of the earth." But, almost every teaching that followed reminded them of just how completely they had squandered that calling. The righteousness by religious showboating that they had learned from the Pharisees would never bring to pass God's kingdom. The rules and regulations they kept were of little value because their hearts were corrupt. They were instructed to break off their dependent love affairs with this material world and to live in simple trust that God would supply their basic needs. He told them to seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness." They should learn to be more scrutinizing judges of their own morality than of everybody else's.

If the sermon simply stopped, where would that leave us? We would be overwhelmed by the terrifying awareness that we are not kingdom-caliber people at all, nor can we ever be such people. No matter how hard we try, our hearts seethe with anger on occasion. Our minds are corrupt at times. We cannot stop worrying by ourselves. I believe that the most sensible prize of our asking, seeking, and knocking is that elusive character of the kingdom – to joyfully embrace our dependency on God, to walk with Him, to develop a fully-textured discipleship - so that we will reflect the righteousness that Jesus made available to Christians when He died for our sins. Not only will our Father make this changed man available to us; He must, for we cannot. There is no other solution for our sinfulness.

II. A Perfect Father Can Never Be A Malicious Prankster (9,10)

⁹Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake?

A. God Would Have To Be Depraved to Perform our Bidding on Demand

Children lack the life experience to identify all things properly. One of our children began to speak very clearly, in complete sentences, at a very young age. Like any young father, I thought it was pretty neat to have the smartest child on earth. Of course, I thought differently one day in an Oklahoma City Mall when I passed another young man pushing his mother in a wheelchair. In a very loud, clear and high-pitched voice, my brilliant child observed, “Look Daddy, that lady has a stroller too!” Now, the lady thought it was cute. I, on the other hand, was looking for a rock to crawl under.

If a child asked for a stone, thinking it was a roll, what father would give his child that stone instead of the bread he craved? The shape is similar. It would be kind of funny, wouldn't it? A small child might mistake a snake for a fish, but could a responsible Jewish father give that child an unclean creature, just to teach him a life lesson. Luke 11:12 adds another picture. A certain pale-colored scorpion at rest, with its stinger folded under it was shaped something like an egg. Regardless of the child's request, a good father keeps his child safe. He will not give him a gift that could harm him.

I read somewhere that most of God's answers to our prayers come in one of four ways: 1) “Yes” 2) “No” 3) “Wait and see” and 4) “You have got to be kidding!” There are reasons God may not jump to do our bidding. Sometimes, we are disobedient. We are asking Him about peripheral things when we are already resisting His will in more substantial matters. Often, we lack patience, which God may think we need worse than the thing we are asking for. Perhaps, most often, we simply lack the competence to know what is best from what would ultimately be unclean, unsatisfying, or even dangerous to us, and God, the perfect Father, takes His responsibilities of fatherhood very seriously.

B. My Father Is the Reason I Never Won the Lottery

They gave away \$62 million in Ohio last week. One lady claimed, “Those were my numbers, and I lost my ticket.” I guess it resembled a plan. When the true winner came forward, the first woman filed a suit to stop the state from making the payout. Later, the suit was dismissed, and the first woman was compelled to withdraw her claim. There has been some criminal activity in her past, and she is in the legal doghouse for this stunt. It would be easy for me to sanctimoniously judge her. Still, when I read her story, (and call me sappy) I could not help but have a pang of sympathy for the financial desperation she claimed drove her to it. I've seen what people do when they're scared or desperate, when they feel they are out of options. Good, moral people who would never try to steal a lottery might play it to their detriment. Some might even pray to God that they will win.

When we are in a crisis of any kind, we might pray for what we think will fix our situation as rapidly and as painlessly as possible. The very thing I am certain that I need, my Father is certain I would never be able to handle. Money, power, a miracle - these are the things we long for when we are up against a wall. But, God will never give us a useless stone when we need to be fed. He will never give us a vile serpent when we need to be washed. He will never give us a dangerous scorpion, when he knows that what we really need is not what we desperately crave. Fathers are like that.

III. A Perfect Father Can Never Be an Irresponsible Coddler (11)

... *"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!"*

A. Even to the Extent We Are Evil, We Understand Common-Sense Parenting

A mother was preparing pancakes for her sons, one five and the other 3. The boys began to argue over who would get the first pancake. Their mother saw an opportunity for a moral lesson. "If Jesus were here, He would say, 'Let my brother have the first pancake; I can wait.' Let's try that." "Good idea," the older brother said as he turned to the younger, adding, "You can be Jesus!"

Jesus was not calling the crowd "evil" in the sense that they were thoroughly depraved in every way. He was speaking of them as evil in that they did not know the righteousness of the kingdom. He was speaking of them, and us, in our natural, sinful state. We still understand love and caring for our kids. We understand "good gifts" in contrast to dangerous gifts. We know that to give any child everything he or she demands is to destroy that little one. We know that over-indulging a child is bad parenting.

B. What Kinds of Things Do Kingdom Children Ask of their Father?

Like our own children, we need to grow in the quality of the things for which we ask. The days of praying for the lottery need to be behind us. The days of praying for quick, easy fixes, with no thought of being shaped into the likeness of Christ through what we are enduring are passing. More and more, we need to find ourselves praying for things that will make us more like our Father.

What are these things? In a similar text, Jesus asked, *"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 the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"* (Luke 12:13). There, Jesus speaks of the greatest gift of all, the Holy Spirit. We need to pray that the evidences of God's presence in our lives be manifested in all things.

The Holy Spirit causes us to care more about God's will and glory than our own. The reverence in which the world holds God's Name and the accomplishment of His will on earth as it is in heaven will become more urgent to us than the prizes of this world. This urgency will find us praying for our witness, our relationships, our fellow-Christians and for Christ's Church. We will be content with daily bread, but hungering for more and more of God's righteous character. The Holy Spirit will empower us to achieve virtues that would ordinarily be beyond us such as responding to offenses with grace. God desires to give us these good gifts that reflect our conformity to His mind.

It has been my objective this morning to give you a few points to reflect on about prayer. I do not wish to imply that there are so many guidelines to prayer that you find yourself evaluating every concern of your heart and every petition to death so that you end up thinking too much and praying too little. That's a trap I fall into sometimes. You will inevitably ask for wrong things, knock on a wrong door and seek God's answers in some wrong places. You'll never pray perfectly, so you need to just pray where you are. God is your Father, and you are His child. That's what matters.

Recently, there has been an issue pressing on my heart, and to express what was really on my heart as a prayer seemed a little inappropriate. In a way, it seemed selfish. It was one of those things that others must endure and are currently enduring, so why should I or my family be exempt? Besides, God has good He needs to work out in the lives of others involved. I was chatting about all this with Linda, who was bearing the same burden and she just gave me that look that I usually interpret to mean, "You're thinking too much!" So, the next morning, I decided it was time to stop overanalyzing the matter. I just prayed my heart's desire. Within hours, the issue was resolved.

There are times in my devotional life when I struggle so much with what might be right or wrong in the grand scope of the kingdom, or, when I am so sensitive as to what is and what is not a selfish prayer on my part, that I am tediously slow to just be a child and express my heart to my Father. I don't know why I sometimes act like it's my job to work out all that stuff. After the fact, I just shake my head and think. "Look who thinks he can do God's job." But, I am grateful that I am at least learning that God is still teaching me what it means to just be His child, to express my heart and to patiently wait for Him to sort out all those questions of kingdom good, heart motives and all that other hard stuff. It's a lot simpler that way.

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