

Introduction

The subject of prayer comes up four times in the Sermon on the Mount. 1) Jesus tells us “pray for those who persecute you” (5.44), 2) “Do not be like the hypocrites” (6.5), “pray in this way” (6.9, the Lord’s Family Prayer), and in our text for today, 7.7-11:

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

Here the particular angle developed by Jesus is persistence in prayer. He explains the duty and encourages obedience to it. So those are the two things I want to cover today.

1A. Let us begin with how the duty is explained

There is so much value in explanation on prayer in this context. It is central to coming to grips with the radical certainty of the promise that God will answer our prayers—no ifs, ands or buts about it: **it will be given to you...you will find...it will be opened to you.**

1B. First, it is an abiding duty

Ask, seek, and knock relay a command to continuous prayer. It is an abiding duty that in effect says, “Keep on asking, keep on seeking, and keep on knocking.” In other words, persist, persevere, and keep on keeping on in a walk with God that lives, breathes, and moves in an atmosphere of prayer.

2B. Second, it is an intermittent duty

As we walk (or run busily) along on our way, we have to pause often to get our bearings and reorient our steps. When we pause, we have to block everything else out and concentrate on communion with God. Here is where I am now and the boat I am in is rocking, perhaps even more than before. How do I settle things down, how do I find my way? I find my way by stopping and concentrating in prayer.

Of course, we are conscious of God at all times, but with different degrees of intensity. Our awareness of the Lord and His presence with us can be like peripheral vision. We are looking at other things, whatever is presently in front of us challenging us, and as we look ahead at these things, we know that the Lord is there. He is in our peripheral vision no matter what it is that is in our direct line of vision.

For good reason, we put all of our energies into the task before us and it has to draw on all of our thoughts and feelings. There is appropriateness in this. It is not wrong to have God in our peripheral vision at times. In fact, it is righteous because it involves doing what the Lord tells us to do. He says, “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men” (Col 3.23). Literally, whatever you do, do the work from the depths of your soul for the Lord. This takes concentration of mind, heart and soul. It demands a focus on the task. Therefore, it is godly to do our work whole-heartedly *as the Lord commands* and to thereby commune with God in a somewhat “distant” way. He is always in our peripheral vision even when we focus on this, that, or some other thing according to His will.

When the Lord is “distant” in the right way, we act in His name: **And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Col 3.17).** Prayer is involved for we give thanks at points when we break from total concentration on our work. For example, a bricklayer working under a blue sky may get to the top of the step-like corner, place his level on the top of the structure, catch his breath at this point of accomplishment, and thank God for everything (for the blue sky, the chemistry of mortar,

shape, height, width, length, level and plumb). Obviously, he cannot spend his day dreaming about blue skies and white beaches, even in praise to God for these beautiful things. He cannot do this because God commands him to work heartily at his work.

Consequently, the call to keep on keeping on in prayer is across the board of our walk with the Lord. It refers to intermittent prayer in which God is *not* peripheral but central. This is a call to regular times of refocusing on the Lord in prayer. It is a call to shift from having the Lord in the margins of our vision to a special looking unto Jesus and fixing our eyes on Him. This is regular but intermittent, intermittent but regular. We keep asking, seeking, and knocking. When the necessary distance seems unending, we long for time with God, for fellowship in concentrated prayer, for the communion of the saints and the communion of the Holy Spirit. Then we can ask, seek, and knock in earnest.

3B. Third, it is a spiritual duty

By spiritual duty, I mean that it is a pursuit of kingdom righteousness by the blessing of the Holy Spirit. **But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you (Mat 6.33). If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him! (Lk. 11.13)**

All our needs (all the needs that the Father knows we have need of them) are part of this picture, but the focus here is much more than our temporal needs, just as life is much more than food and the body is much more than clothing.

The focus on kingdom righteousness means that our needs are even greater than we may have at first thought. We stand in need before holy things and treasures, before righteousness that exceeds! This is truly humbling. When we consider the entire package, we have to cling to Christ as our great priest because we see all too clearly that we fail and need His blessing.

We are to be about the supreme task of “going about everywhere doing good works” that others see and that display the glory of God for all to see and relish (Mat 5.13-16). The righteousness of the kingdom includes keeping the commandments and teaching others to do so as well (Mat 5.19). It includes the duty to curb anger both in ourselves and in others (Mat 5.21). Righteousness involves the pursuit of sexual purity in both body and mind (Mat 5.27). It involves truthfulness in which little things, promises regarding small things, mean a lot (Mat 5.33). It involves a strong principle of non-resistance in the face of pain inflicted on us, such that we do not retaliate in thought, word, or deed. Instead, we turn the other cheek and go the extra mile (Mat 5.38-42). We pursue the kind of love that causes us to pray for our enemies (Mat 5.43-48) and to pray in the fullness of the Lord’s family prayer (Mat 6. 7-14). We try to avoid hypocrisy (Mat 6.1-4), especially with regard to prayer noting how the Lord’s Prayer is sandwiched within the warning against hypocrisy (cf. Mat 6.1-4 and 16-18).

We can add more to this list: the call to forgive as forgiven (Mat 6.14-15), to serve God in every earthly thing (Mat 6.19-34), to avoid being judgmental while judging just judgment (Mat 7.1-5), and to bear witness to the treasure of the gospel in a discerning way (Mat 7.6).

It takes little imagination to move in thought to the ultimate point in all of these things, namely, that we are to seek God in all things. We are to seek the Lord Jesus to know Him better and better, to fellowship with one another, and with the Father in the communion of the Holy Spirit. We pray, “Hallowed be thy name.” We say, “Not unto us, not unto us but to your name give glory.” We say, “O Lord you have said, ‘Seek my face,’ so we may say, ‘O Lord, your face will I seek.’”

These are all examples of kingdom righteousness. When we consider these things as the precious metals of a new life in Christ, we have to say, “This is a marvelous treasure that we possess.” When we see our failures in the light this treasure reflects, we have to say, “O my Lord, I am in great need of spiritual blessings that cut across all temporal things.”

Now we have the point like the point of an arrow piercing the heart, captivating the mind and guiding the life (like a compass!). Jesus is telling us as our commander and king to ask, seek,

and knock for this entire package of Christian blessings, graces, and virtues that enable us to seek God in relation to everything.

2A. Now consider how obedience is encouraged

Pointedly, obedience is encouraged by the promise of answered prayer.

Three things here give light on this encouragement.

1B. Jesus personalizes to encourage us (you, you, and you, v. 7)

It is reassuring to read the passage repeatedly and hear the direct reference to “you.” Of course, Jesus speaks to His listeners, to the crowds and disciples who were there with Him on the mountainside. However, these words are for the church that Jesus came to build. Part of His block laying for this building is right here in the anticipatory words of the Sermon on the Mount. They are His words for the church in the time between His comings. We can therefore hear these words as directly addressed to us today: “you” means you here today under the sound of my voice. Each of us can personalize and say, “What a wonder, He includes me in these words.” He says, “You, you, and you” not just to take in all of us *but to emphasize the personal nature of the promise to each of us*. When He says, “you,” each of us can ask, “Do you mean me?” His answer is “Yes, I am speaking to you emphatically.

He says, “It will be given to you,” so I can say, “It will be given to me.”

He says, “You will find,” so each of us can say, “I will find.”

He says, “It will be opened to you,” so we can each say, “It will be opened to me.”

I have His word on it: I have His gift of answered prayer, I will find what I seek, and I will have an open door in front of me. The personalizing is very encouraging.

2B. Jesus universalizes to encourage us (everyone, v. 8)

Everyone who asks receives. That is, all who ask receive. When Jesus then says, “the one who,” He simply refers to a class of people and thus again to all who seek and to all who knock. He universalizes three times for emphasis again. Thus, the Lord promises emphatically, “You, all of you, every one of you, yes, you, truly, you will have what you petition in prayer.”

3B. Jesus illustrates to encourage us

To make the point even stronger, and thus, to encourage us even more, Jesus gives an illustration from the experience of earthly fathers. He compares earthly fathers with the Father in heaven. ⁹ **Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? ¹¹ 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 order for a child living near the shores of the Mediterranean Sea to survive, he needs the staple foods of bread and fish. What father in his right mind would give a stone to his child instead of the bread he seeks, a snake instead of fish? No normal earthly father would be so cruel when his son asks for food out of a sense of need and dependence.

Indeed, we show love and kindness instead of cruelty and we do so *as evil people* (as failing and frail sinners). Despite our limitations due to our sinfulness, we still manage to give good gifts to our children. On this note, Jesus gives the punch line of His illustration. It is another *a fortiori* that works from the lesser (the evil earthly father) to the greater (the holy heavenly Father): ¹¹ **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!** Beyond the contrast of evil with holy, we also have the contrast regarding knowledge (what you know is so much less than what God knows). The contrasts fill each other out: your evil nature implies something about God’s holy nature, the Father in heaven implies your earthiness, your knowledge of good gifts and how to give them implies God’s knowledge of good gifts and His knowledge of the best way to give them.

Therefore, marvelously, Jesus is telling us (promising us) that our heavenly Father will answer our persistent prayers out of the resources of His perfection. He will answer our prayers

according to His Fatherly love, His holiness, and His omniscience. He will answer with perfect love, knowledge, and wisdom.

Jesus encourages prayer by telling us that the Father will give us good things; they are ours for the asking.

Conclusion

1) Jesus commands us to pray. It is a duty and not an option, but it is a great privilege.

We have the duty of persistent prayer, of constancy in prayer of asking, seeking, and knocking.

2) Jesus tells us how to think rightly about prayer

Are we thinking rightly if we look at what we have in life as to health and possessions, to know the blessings of God? These are blessings to be sure, but they are not blessings in and of themselves. They are not necessarily blessings *per se*. For example, the gift of wealth often brings the curse of self-sufficiency with it. The rich have a hard time entering the kingdom of God. It is a curse to have things if they enable you to feel independent of God. It is a curse to feel no need of Him. This is idolatry; it is worshipping the creature more than we worship the Creator.

Truly, the loss of wealth can be the true blessing when by such loss God weans us from earthly things to embrace the things of the Spirit with thankful dependence.

You see, we cannot look at what we have in the bank, our homes, and our jobs and say to ourselves, "this shows the blessing of God on my life." Nor can we look at these things, at what we lack of them, and say, "This shows the cursing of God on my life." It is not one for one. There is no automatic formula here.

Therefore, we must view all things in their true light as created things that give the speech of God for us to share in day by day. Creation is a virtual playground on which we learn and play in the presence of God with the privilege of sharing in His thoughts. We must see all things in connection with the purpose of God for the human family, for us individually, and for us as a part of His redeemed family. We may have things in abundance to try our faith and teach us thankfulness. We may have little of the world's goods to prove us and develop our faith in a way that is beyond the value of gold and silver. Thus, we know that righteousness is the greatest good that is like a suitcase to be unpacked day by day with thankful prayer.

3) Jesus encourages us to pray.

Prayer is a key means in the life of the believer trying to live a holy and righteous life. It is to be a way of life as part of a quest for God and His righteousness.

Thus He tells us to persist *until* you find, receive, and doors are open in front of you. It encourages us to persistent prayer to know that our loving, holy, and wise heavenly Father will answer our prayers.

Here is a marvelous promise: all the lofty principles and blessings of the Sermon on the Mount (the Beatitudes, the solid principles of the law, the sanctifying work of the Spirit) are ours by persistent prayer!