

# Incentives to Pray

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[ 0 : 00 ] Our first scripture reading is Psalm 65. By awesome deeds you answer us with righteousness.

O God of our salvation, the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farther seas, the one who by his strength established the mountains, being girded with might, who stills the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples, so that those who dwell at the ends of the earth are in awe at your signs.

You make the going out of the morning and the evening to shout for joy. You visit the earth and water it. You greatly enrich it. The river of God is full of water.

You provide their grain, for so you have prepared it. Your water is furrows abundantly, settling its riches, softening it with showers and blessing its growth.

You crown the year with your bounty. Your wagon tracks overflow with abundance. The pastures of the wilderness overflow. The hills gird themselves with joy.

[ 1 : 42 ] The meadows clothe themselves with flux. The valleys stack themselves with grain. They shout and sing together for joy. Our second scripture reading is from Matthew chapter 7, verses 7 to 11.

Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. And the one who seeks, finds.

And the one who knocks, it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent?

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 ends today's reading. Thank you very much, Ashley. How many of you noticed this morning that we had a new keyboard player playing for us this morning?

[ 2 : 54 ] Amen. Amen. And some of you may know Dr. Bradley Roll. Some of you may not. But one of the things I have come to appreciate about Brad since he has come to Nassau, come back to Nassau, and been attending our church, is just his faithfulness.

I know his schedule. He is busy as a medical doctor, has crazy schedules. And to see his desire to want to serve, to see his desire to make the sacrifice to serve, just speaks volumes.

And I pray that that desire to serve would be contagious among us. One of the values we have here at our church is that everyone would serve in some way.

And Brad, I just want to commend you just for wanting to serve and just the sacrifice that I know that you are having to make to serve.

And so that doesn't go unnoticed, and I want to just thank you for doing that. I've heard it said that if you want to embarrass the average Christian, just ask them to tell you the details of their prayer life.

[ 4 : 18 ] And I think the statement is true because the reality is that one of the common struggles of the Christian life is we struggle to pray.

And I think the natural question that arises is why. Why do we, as Christians, struggle to pray? And I think the question is especially important to consider in light of the five verses that were just read in our hearing as we continue our sermon series in the Sermon on the Mount.

I think it's a valid question for us to ask ourselves. Why is it that we Christians struggle to pray in light of these five verses that the Lord Jesus uttered from his lips to the first set of disciples who sat at his feet and by extension to all of us who are disciples who call on his name?

And I think the reason that we should question why we struggle to pray is because in these five verses, Jesus gives us two compelling incentives to pray.

And I want us to consider them in our remaining time. So would you pray with me? Father, we are so grateful that we are able to call you Father.

[ 6 : 09 ] We're grateful, Lord, that you have sent your Son to live a perfect life that none of us could live.

And to die the death that we all deserve to die. And so that you might forgive us and reconcile us. Call us your sons and daughters. We thank you this morning that we are able to gather on the Lord's Day today with brothers and sisters of a like precious faith and together sing to you and pray to you.

And now to be addressed by you from your word. Would you speak to our hearts, Lord? Would you help each of us to hear in the context of the lives we live?

Lord, would you encourage us where we need to be encouraged?

[ 7 : 18 ] Would you convict us where we need to be convicted? Would you help us to grow for the good of our own lives and for the glory of your great name?

And it's in Christ's name we pray. Amen. So what are the two compelling reasons or the two compelling incentives that the Lord Jesus gives to us in these five verses that we are considering this morning?

The two incentives are found, the first one is found in verses 7 and 8. And the second is found in verses 9 to 11.

Those are the two incentives that Jesus commends to us to encourage us to pray. Normally I would foreshadow what the points are.

I would normally give you the two incentives, but I want us to discover them this morning. Rather than laying them out up front, I want us to discover the first incentive in verses 7 and 8, and then the second in verses 9 to 11.

[ 8 : 42 ] So let's consider the first incentive in verses 7 and 8. Let's look at it again. Jesus says, Jesus is not just giving us some principles on how to get what you want.

But sadly, that is what many have reduced these words of Jesus to. They believe their general life principles to help us to achieve and succeed.

And they would tell us, you can just ask and you can just seek and you can just knock and you'll get what you want.

But really, Jesus is not commending these words to us as some recipe for success. Jesus is commending these words to us as principles of prayer.

And this becomes ever clear when we look at verse 11. In verse 11, he says, 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?

[ 10 : 19 ] Now, it's important to point out another very critical issue in these words of Jesus.

These words of Jesus are not directed to every single person. These words of Jesus are directed to his children.

These words of Jesus are given to those who have been born again by the Spirit of God. Those who have been translated from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of his dear Son.

And it is those persons to whom Jesus gives these words. And he says they are the ones who are to pray to God as their Father in heaven.

That's what Jesus is addressing in these five verses. And I raise it this morning because there are people who confuse God being the creator of everyone and God being the Father of some.

[ 11 : 26 ] He's not the Father of all. He's only the Father of those who he has redeemed through the salvation that Jesus has brought and who belong to him through adoption.

He's the creator of us all. But he's not the Father of us all. This is a very important point to see. It is the plain teaching of Scripture. We will see that we are God's children by adoption, in particular in the letters of Paul and Romans, Galatians, Ephesians.

And in John 8, Jesus makes it very plain that this is the reality when he addressed the Pharisees who were the most religious people of his day. If you were to ask the average person in Jesus' day who represented the people who belonged to God and who had God as their Father, they would have pointed to Pharisees.

But listen to what Jesus says in John 8, 42-44. Jesus said to them, to the Pharisees, If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here.

I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word.

[12:52] You are of your father, the devil. And your will is to do your father's desire. Life in many ways is very simple.

It's a two-way street. We are in darkness or we are in light. God is our father or the devil is our father. God is not father of all.

He's creator of all. And we need to grasp this when we come to these words of Jesus in Matthew 7, 7-11.

Jesus is commending these words to the dear children of God. He's commending these words to those who the Apostle John says in 1 John, sorry, in the Gospel of John, chapter 1, verses 12 and 13.

Those who did receive him, who believed in his name, to those he gave the right to become children of God, who were born not of blood, not of the will of man, but of the will of God.

[14:08] Those are the persons these verses are directed to. And so if in your heart of hearts this morning, you know that you have not trusted in Jesus, if you know that he is not your Lord, he is not your Savior, you have not yet believed in his name, then I urge you to do so.

I urge you to do so because as you do so, then you will come in the four corners of these words that Jesus is addressing to those who belong to God as his children.

Now to those of us who belong to God as his children, Jesus offers us these two incentives to pray. First in 7 to 11, and then the second one in 7 and 8, sorry, and then 9 to 11.

The first one is this. The first incentive that we have to pray, that we draw from verses 7 and 8, is Jesus says pray.

He says ask and seek and not because. Your prayers will be answered. Your prayers will be answered. That's why we should seek.

[15:31] We should ask in prayer. It's going to be given. That's why we should seek in prayer. We will find. That is why we should knock in prayer because the closed door will be opened.

In short, Jesus says pray because your prayers will be answered. Now Jesus, in this very short teaching, lays out for us three kinds of prayers.

Three kinds of prayers that Jesus lays out for us. Asking prayers and seeking prayers and knocking prayers. Asking prayers seem to be the normal kinds of petitions that we would lift up to the Lord in an ongoing way.

They are specific. We simply ask and we make these requests known before the Lord. We specify them.

Seeking prayers are different. Seeking prayers are not specific prayers, but they seem to be prayers in the area of seeking the Lord's direction, seeking the Lord's will when we don't know specifically.

[16:46] We can ask when we know, but when we don't know, we have to seek. We have to wait and ask the Lord to give us guidance and direction to know what his will is for us.

So let me illustrate the difference. So, for example, let's say that you find yourself in a situation where you have a financial obligation coming up. You don't have enough money for it. If you are a believer, well, then you should pray.

You should pray, specifically asking the Lord to provide the resources for that need. And I believe if you are a believer, then that is your impulse.

You would naturally pray and say, Lord, would you provide for this particular need? But let's say that you are on a job and your boss comes to you and he says to you, I want to give you a promotion, but you need to move to another island or you need to move to another country in order to get the promotion.

Well, that is something that you're going to seek the Lord about, I hope, because there's so many unknowns with that. You don't know the impact that it can have on your life and if you're married with children on your family's life.

[18:13] And so you would wonder, Lord, should I take this? Should I not take this? You seek the Lord concerning that matter. The boss might say to you, well, you have a month to let me know and you'll be taking the time to pray and to wait and to listen.

And then, depending on what the Lord says, obey. Whether that is to stay or whether that is to go. And so seeking prayers are those kinds of unclear situations that we come up to.

We don't have the wisdom to know which way to go. And we seek the Lord. Lord, would you show me your will? And the truth is, life is such that all of us should have seeking prayers. We should be praying and asking the Lord about those things that we're not wise enough to know. We're not powerful enough to know. And then the third is knocking prayers. And the same way that seeking prayers are more intensified than asking prayers, knocking prayers are more intensified than seeking prayers.

[ 19 : 23 ] And knocking prayers seem to be connected to harder situations, lingering situations, situations where doors seem to be closed or they, in fact, are closed.

And we come to the Lord and we pray and we ask and we knock because we hopefully have discerned that this is God's will and we know it's God's will, so we keep knocking and knocking. An example would be, for example, maybe a person who's unemployed, been unemployed for a long time. We know it's God's will that we work. And this person may have sent out resumes, they've gone on interviews, but nothing has happened. They remain unemployed and they need to continue to knock and knock and knock on that door of unemployment and ask the Lord, Lord, would you open this door? Maybe it's a situation of injustice. It's beyond our control and we see it. And it is right in front of us and it lingers and we knock and knock and knock. That that door of injustice will be opened into a door of justice.

[ 20 : 40 ] Notice in verse 8, the inclusive word that Jesus uses. It's the word everyone. He says, for everyone who asks, receives. And the one who seeks, finds.

And to the one who knocks, it will be opened. Now, in our English Bibles, it would give the impression that we have to ask once and seek once and knock once. But in the original language, for each prayer that Jesus calls us to pray, it is in present tense, which means that we have to continue. It's an ongoing action. We have to continue in our asking. We have to continue in our seeking. We have to continue in our knocking. So what Jesus is saying to us regarding prayer is ask, seek, and knock.

You receive when you ask, you will find when you seek, and the door will be opened to you when you knock. So what he says to us in short is, whatever kind of prayer, whatever kind of prayer we pray, your prayer will be answered.

[ 22 : 03 ] Now, let's think about this a bit more in light of what Jesus is saying to us in verses 7 to 8. The Lord Jesus, whom the Apostle Peter tells us in 1 Peter 2, 22, committed no sin, and there's no deceit in his mouth.

This perfect holy Lord says to us, if you ask, you will receive. If you seek, you will find. And if you knock, the door will be opened to you.

Now, as wonderful as this promise is, as trustworthy as the one is who gave it, why is it that we as a people still struggle to pray?

And actually, to speak it more honestly, why is it that we as a people do not pray? Why is it that we habitually do not pray in light of this great incentive that Jesus gives us that our prayers will be answered?

Here's the foundational reason. The foundational reason that we don't pray is we don't believe Christ's words. Foundationally, that's why we don't pray.

[ 23 : 39 ] We don't pray because we really don't believe the words of Christ. Yes, sometimes it is that, as Jesus said to the disciples, the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.

Yes, sometimes it's like that, but that's more seasonal. That's not habitual. That night when Jesus said that to his disciples, that the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak, that was a long night. That was a difficult night. I don't think that that is a reason that we can give for ongoing habit of not praying.

I think, foundationally, the reason we don't pray is we don't believe these words of Jesus. And I think you'd agree with me that it is contradictory when we don't pray and still insist that we believe the promise that Jesus gives us about prayer, that when we ask, we will receive, and when we seek, we will find, and when we knock, the door will be opened.

[ 24 : 55 ] I don't think there's any of us this morning who would say, I'm hearing these words of Jesus for the first time. Perhaps there is, but I doubt that's the case.

We've heard these words. We're hearing them again this morning. And brothers and sisters, the Lord Jesus gave us these words as incentives to pray.

So for those of us who know Jesus Christ, we have turned from our sins, we've trusted in him as Lord and Savior, are there needs in our lives, very specific needs, that we have not and should be lifting up to the Lord in prayer, asking him, asking him that he would meet those needs?

Are there specific situations in our lives that we have no certainty about? We're not sure of how we should proceed.

Are we seeking the Lord concerning it? Maybe it's a relationship. Maybe it's someone you have met and you're exploring a relationship with them. Have you sought the Lord in prayer?

[ 26 : 19 ] Maybe it's a venture that you are considering pursuing. You have no certainty about whether it is God's will or not.

Because the Bible doesn't specifically speak to it. That's the only place we can have certainty from. And therefore, we need to seek the Lord and wait and receive his direction and then obey that direction.

And what about closed doors? What about situations that just seem like it's bolted? But deeper than your heart, you know this is God's will.

Are you knocking on that door? And I understand how easy it is to become discouraged. I understand how easy it is to stop knocking.

And we all go through those seasons. And if that's you this morning, if you have a closed door that is best you know from God's word and from the witness of his spirit that that is a door that is to be opened, I encourage you by God's grace, continue to knock.

[ 27 : 33 ] Because the one who cannot lie says, when we knock, it will be opened. That's the first incentive that Jesus gives us to pray.

Our prayers will be answered. Let's now consider the second incentive that he gives us to pray that we find in verses 9 to 11.

In verses 9 and 10, Jesus asks two questions. Look again at the two questions that he asks.

Or which of you, if his son asked him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if his son, sorry, or if he asked for a fish, will give him a serpent?

Now, to our modern heirs, these questions really sound out of place. They sound unusual, but to the disciples who were seated before Jesus that day, these were perfectly understandable illustrations that Jesus was using as he raised these questions.

[ 28 : 56 ] Those who have studied the background history of Palestine, they tell us that in Jesus' day, the typical small roll of bread looked very much like a stone.

And you can actually, under certain circumstances, mistake it for a stone or mistake a stone for the bread roll that was typical of that day.

And they also tell us that in the Sea of Galilee, there was a eel-like catfish, a long, slender catfish that looked just like a snake.

And somewhere to put it in your hand, you would think that it was a snake. And Jesus was using these two well-known realities of that day, that a small rock could be mistaken to be bread and vice versa.

And this eel-like catfish could be mistaken as a snake or vice versa. And he says, you have any father who wouldn't do that to you.

[ 30 : 14 ] He wouldn't let you come to him, ask for bread, and then he puts a stone in your hand. Or he would not come to him and ask for fish, and then he gives you a serpent.

Says he will not do that. Jesus gives those two illustrations to make a point. Look at the point that he makes in verse 11.

He says, 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.

What Jesus is doing in verse 11 is Jesus is arguing from the lesser to the greater. Jesus is saying, if you who are evil would not do that to your son, to your child, when he asks specifically for bread or for fish, if you won't do that, what about your heavenly father?

the one who's perfect and holy and righteous in all of his ways, how much more will he not give you good things?

[ 31 : 39 ] Jesus is actually helping us to see our universal condition because of the fall. All of us fall under that right description of being evil, all of us, without exception, certainly in comparison to God.

And he says, if you, being evil, know how to give good gifts, what about the perfect, holy, and righteous God? God. So what is the incentive that Jesus gives us in these last three verses, verses 9 to 11?

The second incentive that Jesus gives us to pray is he says to us, pray and ask God and seek God and knock on those doors because God's answers will be good.

first he says, pray because your prayers will be answered. So he says in verses 7 and 8, and then in verses 9 to 11 he says, pray because God's answers will be good.

They wouldn't be evil, they will be good. God will never give us rock for bread and a serpent for fish. [ 33 : 15 ] Do you know that sometimes when God answers our prayers, it seems like he gave us a rock. It seems like he gave us a serpent.

But Jesus says, no, he won't do that because he is good.

His answers to your prayers can only be good, but sometimes we mistake the goodness of God.

When it's not something we were praying for, when it was not what we were looking for, when we in our limited wisdom pray and we ask God for this, but he gives us that.

We seek, and even as we seek, we have some idea of the outcome that we may desire, and God in his goodness and in his infinite wisdom, he gives us something else, and to us, it seems like he has tricked us.

He slipped in the rock, or he slipped in the serpent instead of the thing that we were asking for. it's easy to overlook two very important points that the Lord Jesus makes as he concludes this teaching in verse 11.

[ 34 : 44 ] He summarizes asking, seeking, and knocking with one word, the word ask. ask. And then he summarizes the three promised answers, receives, finds, it will be opened in two words, good things.

He'll give us good things. Whether we ask, seek, knock, God, he will give us good things. And I think what we can conclude from what the Lord is saying is that sometimes he doesn't give us the exact things we pray for, but whatever he gives us is going to be a good gift.

Not good based on our fickle understanding of good, but good based on his divine definition of good. I think a few of you would be aware that when Alexi and I, well, before we got married, we wanted twins.

And when we got married and Alexi got pregnant, we were praying for twins. And we held on to that.

Our friends knew it. Everybody in the church at the time knew it. This would be in 1990. The church had just started. We started in 1990. Alexi got pregnant in 1991. And we had our first appointment to the doctor.

[ 36 : 26 ] We went to the doctor. And he told us that he only heard one heartbeat. I told him his machine wasn't working. And we continued to pray for twins.

And we had loving, well-meaning people in the church. And so they went along with our idea about having twins. Somebody brought us a twin book. They did all kinds of things for us.

Supported us in so many ways. And eventually we went and Alexi was advanced enough that the doctor told her that you're having a girl. and again I told him your machine's not working and we were still praying for twins.

And our loving congregation they bought us gifts and all kinds of things. Somebody even bought us baby clothes and all the colors you know twin stuff and no girl colors blue and all the boy colors. twins. And you could tell where our theology was at the time right? Thank God we're not there anymore. And so lo and behold delivery day came and we had a bouncing baby girl.

[ 37 : 39 ] And of course we were too excited about having a child to be disappointed that we did not get twins. But I remember some months later Danielle was she was a little colicky and I would have the night shift when she wasn't feeling well and I would be pacing up and down praying trying to get her to sleep and I used to joke in those days my prayer life was very very vivid and active because I would pray the whole time just praying with her.

And I remember this one night just walking up and down trying to get her to sleep and then the thought came to me which I believe was from the Lord and you wanted twins.

And I and I was sleepy I was really sleepy I woke up and I said thank you Lord that you didn't answer that prayer thank you that you didn't give us twins.

God is wiser than we are. Having twins would have crushed us. I think if we had twins we probably only had two children. We would not have had more than more than more than two but God in this wisdom did not answer that prayer.

In a sense I was praying for a serpent by asking for two kids that we couldn't handle. I was praying for a rock not bread and God in his wisdom gave us bread gave us fish and gave us a beautiful daughter who has brought us much joy continues to bring us much joy.

[ 39 : 16 ] And so one of the things that I learned from that and I encourage you this morning we have to hold our prayers loosely. You know even when we are absolutely convinced that we know this is a specific thing to pray for let's pray in faith but still hold it loosely because God is wise but more than that God is good and we know that even when we don't know specifically how he is going to answer a prayer we know that his answer will be good because God is good.

The first scripture that was read this morning in Psalm 65 is a wonderful psalm to meditate upon. It's a psalm that reminds us that God is the one to whom all flesh comes to pray.

It's a psalm that reminds us that God is the one who brings people near into his presence through salvation. We don't just go near on our own initiative. He is the one who draws near those whom he saves.

Psalm 65 also helps us to see the goodness of God broadly. It tells us that God is the one who not just brings salvation but he brings provision and he provides for all that he's made.

Psalm 65 tells us how God abundantly provides. That's his goodness to all people. But he does it especially to those who belong to him.

[ 40 : 56 ] Those who are his children. Those who genuinely can call on his name as father. Those whom he has redeemed and adopted as his children.

children. And so brothers and sisters we have in these five verses in Matthew 7, 1 to 5, we have two gracious incentives to pray.

Jesus tells us we should pray because our prayers will be answered. And Jesus tells us we should pray because God's answers will be good.

Isn't it wonderful to just take this to heart? That every prayer that we will pray, prayers we don't even know will come on our lips from now until our dying breath, God is going to answer it.

And God's answer is going to be good. And sometimes his good answer is no. but he will answer every prayer and every prayer will be good.

[ 42 : 24 ] If you're here this morning or you're watching online and you don't know the Lord Jesus as your personal Savior, I have no doubt that you've probably prayed many times.

But the Bible tells us that God doesn't listen to sinners. Any answer that you receive from a prayer that you pray that you think is an answer to your prayer, that's really just out of the goodness of God, that he is gracious and he cares and he provides out of his own goodness, not that he was moved by the words that you prayed.

that's just a good and gracious and kind God. But you can, like those of us who have, by the grace of God, found ourselves within the audience of the people that Jesus is addressing in this passage before us, you can turn from your sin.

you can put your trust in Jesus. And if you do, he has made this promise that whoever comes to him, he will never turn away and you can be God's child through the new birth, through being translated from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of his dear son, God.

And you would then be a part of this audience who get to call on God as father. And who can hold on to this promise that he's going to answer your prayers.

[ 44 : 12 ] And the answers to your prayers are going to be good. My prayer is that you would do that today. My prayer is that you would even consider that this opportunity to hear God's word, this opportunity to be called to put faith in Jesus Christ is the goodness of God to you.

And I pray you would trust in Jesus this morning. We're going to close our time this morning with the hymn God Moves.

And I think it's a fitting hymn for us to close with this morning because prayer. Because it reminds us in many ways about the reality of prayer.

There's a certain amount of mystery in prayer. We don't understand everything about prayer. We don't understand why God says no to some of the requests that we make.

We don't understand why God does other than what we pray. But he hasn't called us to understand. What he's called us to do is to trust. trust.

[ 45 : 23 ] He's called us to trust him as the God who is good and wise, the God who is sovereign. I pray that as we sing this song this morning it will remind us of our need to trust the Lord and that we can trust him even when we don't understand.

So let me pray for us before we sing. Father would you draw near to us in both corporate and personal ways and speak to our hearts Lord in the area of prayer prayer.

And I pray Lord that we would all grow in asking and seeking and knocking. Remembering that in your way and time and in your wisdom you will answer.

and whatever that answer is that it will be good. Not as we define good but as you define good.

And so we give you thanks Lord that you will do this in our hearts in Jesus name.