

# Ask, Seek, Knock

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Preacher: Matt Coburn

[ 0 : 00 ] Paul Miller, in his book, A Praying Life, opens with a story, and it's worth retelling here.

He took his five kids... no, took five of his kids on a camping trip, while his wife and his other child, Kim, who was eight years old and who had never spoken because of a developmental delay, stayed at home. As they climbed out of their van to begin to unpack, he noticed his 14-year-old daughter standing in front of the van, upset. This is the story, he says. This is how he recounts it. When I asked her what was wrong, she said, I lost my contact lens. It's gone. I looked down with her at the forest floor, covered with leaves and twigs. There were a million little crevices for the lens to fall into and disappear. And I said, Ashley, don't move. Let's pray.

But before I could pray, she burst into tears. What good does it do? I've prayed for Kim to speak, and she isn't speaking. He goes on to share his own thoughts. Would I make the problem worse by praying?

If we prayed and couldn't find the contact, would it just confirm Ashley's growing unbelief? I had little confidence that God would do anything, but I prayed silently, Father, this would be a really good time to come through. You've got to hear this prayer for the sake of Ashley. And then I prayed aloud with Ashley, Father, help us to find this contact.

[ 1 : 49 ] What God intended to be a gift can be so hard, can't it? Do we really think God will work in our everyday lives? Can God do impossible things like find a contact lens on a forest floor in central Pennsylvania? Does prayer really do any good? And what if it feels like it doesn't?

These are the questions that, if we do pray, we've all asked. And maybe if we don't pray, it's these questions that keep us from praying. But this brings us to our passage this morning.

We continue in Matthew 7, in Jesus' words, in the Sermon on the Mount. And I want to begin by saying that I always seek, as I prepare a sermon, to let it run through my own soul and for it to affect me deeply.

But this one's affected me more than usual. I have felt the Holy Spirit shining a spotlight on places where I need to grow and where I need God's help in this, revealing how much I struggle at times in prayer.

So, I want you to know that as I speak to you this morning, I speak to you as one who needs this word as much as any of us. So, let's look at Matthew 7. We're going to look at the verses, verses 7 through 11 in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, as He's giving instructions to His disciples on what it looks like to live in His kingdom. This is what He says. Let's read together. Oh, this is on page 762 in the Pew Bible. If you want to watch along, it will also be on the screen up above.

[ 3 : 50 ] Jesus says this, If you ask, 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 to the one who knocks, it will be opened.

Or which 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?

Well, given that, let's do what He says. Let's pray together. Lord Jesus, we do ask for Your help this morning. Lord, we want to be praying people, but we confess that we struggle. Lord, I pray this morning as we sit under Your Word that Your Holy Spirit would help us.

Lord, that You would imprint upon us the truths of this Word. Lord, so that we might obey You joyfully and with a heart filled with faith and hope, confident in the God that we pray to.

Lord, I pray for Your help this morning, that I would speak as I ought. Lord, and that together we might receive and sit under Your Word. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

[ 5 : 27 ] Amen. Why should we pray? It's the question that Jesus asks us answers in this passage this morning, I believe, and I think there are two things. So, if you're an outline person, we have two main points.

The first one is we pray because God knows we need Him for all things. Secondly, we pray because God responds with goodness in all things. So, that's your outline. We're going to explore this together.

So, first, we pray because God knows we need Him in all things. This is what verses 7 and 8 tell us. And it is a very simple structure if you look with me at it. Verse 7 is threefold pattern of a command and then a promise that uses what theologians call a divine passive. So, he says, ask and it will be given. That is, God will give it to you. Seek and you will find. That is, what you seek, God will help you find. Knock and the door will be opened. That is, God will answer at the door as you seek Him in prayer. And verse 8 in some ways is just a restatement of that, saying everyone who seeks God in this way will find God and He will respond. There's not a lot of exegetical complexity to this passage. Jesus is saying, we should do this and God will respond, which raises the question, of course,

God will respond. If we believed, if we obeyed, we would pray, right? But we don't. Why not? Why? I have two thoughts about our heart condition that has to do with the fact that we don't actually believe that we need God as much as we should. The first reason we do this is what I call the pitfall of self-sufficiency. And that is that we think that our lives are what we make of it. We live in a culture that tells us that make your own way, make your own life, determine your success, choose your own adventure. We think it's up to us to do these things. I know many of you are way too young to have seen this movie, but you remember Tom Hanks marooned on an island in the movie Castaway. And after halfway through the movie, he finally makes fire and he dances around this fire and he says, look what

I have created. And he's so proud of himself. And this is what we do with our lives. We build our lives in our careers and in our families and in our self-understanding and our self-presentation to others. We're always building things and we think it's all up to us.

[ 8 : 29 ] And in our pride, God becomes very small. And so, we don't pray to Him. I also think that we don't think He cares or is able. Well, yeah, I pray to God about, you know, my spiritual lethargy, but I don't pray to God about my career. Like, what's He going to do to change my advisor's mind about my project? That's crazy. We don't think we need Him because we don't think He's involved. We think it's up to us. Do you see how that saps our confidence in praying?

If we don't need Him, there is nothing to ask for. I think there's a second reason why we think we don't need Him that's even more profound and flows out of the context of this passage. And that is that we lose...we have lost sight of the amazing nature of God's kingdom. Because if we really wanted God's kingdom to come, we would pray more. Think about what we've learned as we've looked through the Sermon on the Mount. Think about some of the commands and what it would look like if these things were actually true, if we loved our enemies, if we gave sacrificially, if we didn't worry, if we didn't lust or hate, if we went the second mile with those who were persecuting us and making our lives difficult, if we embraced being weak and meek and even persecuted for righteousness' sake, if we loved others the way we ought to, if we served others, if we lived distinctly for Jesus, if this were what filled our hopes, if these were the things that we set our hearts on, oh, friends, would we not pray? Because we can't do any of these things, can we?

So not only do we have this pride about building our own life in all of its specifics, but specifically in our spiritual life, we have lost sight of how great God's kingdom is, and we've reduced our spiritual aspirations to things we can do, and then we don't need God in it.

But the Sermon on the Mount says God has called us to a far greater kingdom, something we can't just work up by learning a new technique, by buckling down and trying a little harder or being a little more disciplined or finding a new prayer strategy, journal card system, whatever it is. And those are all great. I'm not saying any of those things are bad. But at the end of the day, they're never going to produce the kingdom of God in our hearts and in our lives.

Only God can change hearts. Only God can strengthen our weary limbs. Only God can give us faith when we are struggling or facing persecution. Only God can produce His kingdom in us. This is why James says that every good and perfect gift, every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

[ 12 : 12 ] The Apostle Paul, in confronting the spiritual pride of the Corinthian church, says, what do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, then why do you boast of it as if it were up to you and not a gift from God? Friends, if our view of the kingdom of God was great, then we would pray. And I know the race is long. And sometimes it's hard. We grow weary of longing for things that we can't do on our own. But this is the reason why God gave us prayer.

This is the reason why this passage is in the center or is in the middle of this section, this sermon on how to live in God's kingdom. Because we were meant to depend on God and to ask for Him and to seek Him and to knock on the door of His faith or of His kingdom so that He would answer and bring so that He would respond and show His care and His goodness. When we embrace our dependence upon Him, God shines in this picture as He provides for us and as He cares for us. So we do need Him. And we need to confess that we don't always admit that. And we need to hear the call to return to a place of saying, God, nothing in my hands I bring, but I come to you and ask and seek and knock. This is, I believe, the first reason why Jesus has given us that we ought to pray. We ought to pray because we need Him in all things.

But Jesus goes on in verses 9 through 11 and tells us the second reason, a second reason why we can be moved to prayer. And that is that we pray because God responds with His goodness in all things. Jesus continues in the section. If you look, you can see that there's an illustration here. And it's an illustration that we've, I feel like we've already talked about this because I preached on God as a heavenly Father at the beginning of the prayer, the Lord's prayer.

I preached on this when we preach about prayer because in verse 7 it says, your heavenly Father knows what you need before you ask. I feel like I've preached on this a lot, but we're going to go back and live and drink this well one more time because it's such important truth about God. The illustration is this in verse 9. Which of you, if your son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Now, the bread in the first century was round like a stone. It wasn't, you know, rectangular and come in a box pre-sliced. You know, so it looked like a stone. So there's a reason why there was an analogy. Why stone instead of bread? Well, they look similar. But who would give their child a stone when they ask for bread? And Jesus goes on and He says, which Father, if your child asks you for fish, would give him a serpent? Now, again, there's a surmise that there was a fish there that was long and thin, maybe like a gar or something like that, that was eel-like, right? Or serpentine. And so, again, you have something that's similar. And Jesus says, when a child comes to a parent and asks him for the basic sustenance of life, for this bread and this fish, these were the staples. This is like if your parent, if your child comes and asks you for peanut butter and jelly, right? Or yogurt or whatever it is that's your stapled food in your household.

[ 16 : 21 ] Why would you give him something else that's at best useless and at worst dangerous? Jesus' argument is, no human parent typically does that. Now, he knows that human parents don't always do this perfectly. And some of you may recognize, my human parents don't do that or haven't done that.

And I have a struggle to see God that way because I didn't experience God that way. Don't let this derail you. Jesus is using an illustration of what is typically true.

And we see that because verse 11 makes it very clear. If you who are evil, right, even parents who don't know God and live completely self-centeredly in sin, you who are evil know how to give good gifts, that this is the normal pattern of humanity, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to His children? Jesus says, this is why we should ask and seek and knock, because God is a loving heavenly Father who delights to give good things. And again, this is so simple at one level. You know, we could be done 20 minutes early. That was a great sermon, right?

God is your heavenly Father. He delights. Go to Him. Ask, seek, and knock. Go to Him in prayer because He loves you. But we don't do it, do we? We don't believe this because we don't believe it's true of God. And why is this? I think there are actually two reasons. Again, and I'm going to unpack these.

First, I think there's an intellectual barrier to believing that God responds by giving good gifts. Some of you are pretty smart, and you're sitting there and you're saying, does God really give us anything we want? What if I ask for a thermonuclear bomb? Or what if I ask for everyone else in the world to die so that I can get everything that I want?

[ 19 : 01 ] Right? We can imagine conceptually, intellectually, there are all sorts of things we could ask for, and we're like, God isn't going to give us that. That's our instinct. He doesn't always respond. He doesn't give good gifts when we ask Him. How do we think about this? Well, there are

a couple things we need to say. First, we need to recognize that James in chapter 4 unpacks the human heart a little bit and the dynamic of prayer with a little more granularity. So, in James 4, 2, he says, you desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. He's obviously dealing with conflicts in the church, and he's trying to say, what's the root of that? You do not have because you do not ask, and you ask and you do not receive because you ask wrongly to spend it on your passions. So, James reminds us that sometimes we don't receive what we ask for because we don't ask, but sometimes we don't receive what we ask for because we ask with wrong motives, that our hearts are set not on God and not on His kingdom, but on ourselves, right? And God might rightly say no to those prayers because the God of the Bible is not a cosmic vending machine where we put in our coins of prayer and get the candy bars that we really want out of the vending machine. God isn't that at all.

The God of the Bible is a heavenly Father, which means many things, but it means He is a sovereign Creator. He is a compassionate Shepherd, and He is the best of all fathers who knows what His kids need, who is able to provide for them, and who's committed to doing good for them, but maybe not exactly the way we ask. I want to quote at length a commentator, R.T. France, on this because he wrote so eloquently about how we wrestle with this problem. He says this, the good things which God will surely give do not necessarily include everything that His children might like to have. The *carte blanche* approach to petitionary prayer does not find support in the New Testament as a whole. It is God as the Father in heaven who knows what is, quote, good for His children. And as with a human parent, His generosity may not always coincide with the child's wishes. But for all that necessary caution, there is an openness about verses 7 and 8 which invites not merely a reason to be a Christian to be a Christian. It is not merely a Christian, but a willingness to explore the extent of His generosity, securing in the knowledge that only what is, quote, good will be given so that mistakes in prayer through human short-sightedness will not rebound on those praying.

Tim Keller was quoted in a sermon. I couldn't find his actual quote, but he was quoted in a sermon as saying, if God actually gave us everything we wanted and we were honest, we would stop praying today because we know how foolish we can be and that we ask for wrong things sometimes and they're not good for us. And we would ask our friends to stop praying for us because they're not going to pray well either. And if God is merely simply a wish fulfillment for fallen humanity, what a terrible thing that would be? If my five-year-old asked me for a flamethrower because it's cool, what father would give him that? Maybe a squirt gun, but not a flamethrower. God knows better than we what is good for us. And so, as Tim Keller puts it in another place, God will either give us what we ask or give us what we would have asked if we know everything that He knows.

We may not fully understand how God will respond, but do you see what R.T. France is saying here, that we're meant to go to God in freedom because we go to one who is smarter than us, who is wiser than us, who is more pure in His heart and motives than us, who knows what is good better than we do. And so, we can ask Him for the world and He will give us everything that is good for us to have.

[ 24 : 04 ] He's a good Father. And when He responds to our prayers, maybe not the way we want it to, we can still look at it and say, this is not a stone.

This leads us to the second barrier. And that is, there's not only an intellectual barrier, but there's an emotional barrier to believing that God responds to our prayers by giving good gifts.

We're not sure that He cares to respond to our prayers in giving us good things. We are worn down by life in a fallen world where He doesn't fix everything that we think He ought to fix.

And so, we stop praying. We don't know if He cares about our residency immigration application to a very fallen and broken bureaucracy. We don't know if He cares about helping us in the face of chronic pain or financial difficulty. We don't know if He cares that we run into a traffic jam.

And are late to our job interview. We don't know if He cares when we keep falling into that habitual sin again, again, and we've prayed for it to stop. We don't know if He cares when wars continue to ravage the world that we live in, where discrimination continues to reside in and express itself in societies throughout the world. We don't know if He cares when our marriage feels so barren and so broken. And we've been praying for restoration for so long. And often we don't care, we don't think He cares about little things like a lost contact lens on a camping trip. Our own experience of trials and of suffering and of loss accumulate. And we pray, but it feels like God isn't responding.

[ 26 : 32 ] And we know it's good to pray about these things. And we know that God can do things. Look at Jesus in the gospel, right? He heals the leper. He gives sight to the blind. He raises the dead. He forgives and embraces sinners, cast out by everyone else. But He doesn't always give us what we want. He doesn't always fix those things. I'm so encouraged as I try to navigate these dynamics of the chapter 11 of the book of Hebrews.

You know, this is the great chapter of faith. These are the great saints of the old. You can go back and read it later where Abraham and David and Joseph and on and on and on. All these people, they believed God.

And God answered them and did miraculous things to continue His work in the world and to bless them with good things. But if you've read through to the end of the chapter, you remember there's a turning point in verse 35. And in fact, it's one of the most comforting parts of the Bible for me. Because I realize the Bible talks about our real experience. There is a God who parts waters and makes dry land in the middle of the Red Sea. There is a God who produces food for 5,000 people out of nowhere. But it is also true. And I'm going to read Hebrews, the end of Hebrews 11 for you. All these lived in faith and saw God do great things. But then He goes on and says, some were tortured, refusing to accept relief so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned. They were sawn in two. They were killed with a sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, and mistreated, those of whom the world was not worthy, wandering about in deserts and in mountains and in dens and caves on the earth. And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us, they should not be made perfect.

[ 29 : 07 ] So the Bible tells us that God is not a genie who waves His magic wand to make everything better. The Bible is consistent in saying that God sovereignly allows difficulty, trial, opposition in our lives. In fact, He says suffering is a normal part of life and that suffering is part of His goodness to us on a global sense because it is producing something better in us. And this is what we see in Hebrews. Those Old Testament saints didn't see the promised land because the promise was yet to come. Many of us in this room have experienced difficult things, and we've prayed, and we've thought, God, why don't You respond? Why don't You fix these things? And the accumulation of disappointment, of pain, of loss, of suffering, of grief, it swallows up our prayer lives, doesn't it?

And it makes us want to not pray. This is where God's challenged me in this passage. As I sat and watched my first wife battle cancer, finally succumb to it, we prayed, we trusted, we believed, we hoped. We knew that healing would come either in this life or in the next, and we treasured the hope of eternal life together. And when she died, I did not curse God.

Or stopped believing in Him. But I have seen my prayer life suffer, and the Holy Spirit has shown me that this week. My trust in God has been dulled. It's easy for me to become more resigned than hopeful.

It's hard sometimes for me to believe that God wants to give good gifts. And I don't ask for things as much as I ought to.

How do I say with faith, this is not a stone?

[ 31 : 33 ] Well, friends, you can pray for me, and I will pray for you. But there's only one answer to this question. There's only one place where we can go to know for sure and be renewed and restored in our life. And it is in the gospel that we all believe as Christians. It is at the very core of our faith.

Romans 8 31, Paul says this, How can I pray to God?

Because Jesus came, and He lived, and He died, and He rose again. So that I might be saved from my sin. So that I might be brought from darkness to life.

So that I might have confidence that He hasn't abandoned this world to its fallenness, but His redemptive work is sure and certain, and it is inexorably leading towards a glorious future when we will see the fullness of redemption. And right now, the work that He's doing is saving more and more people through this very message of the gospel.

He saved me from sin so that I might have a renewed life, so that I might have a renewed relationship with God, so that the sin that had separated me from Him is now taken away because Jesus bore it on the cross.

[ 33 : 35 ] And instead, I am reconciled, I am adopted, and I have a heavenly Father who loves me and has delivered me and is delivering me and will deliver me.

When I look at the cross, I can trust. When I look at the cross, I can believe.

Whatever my circumstances are, whatever your circumstances are, I can look at it and say, this is not a stone because I know my heavenly Father would not give me a stone.

We will suffer. We will face trials. But whatever they are, they are not a stone. And they are not a serpent. God gives good gifts to those who ask and seek and knock.

Remember Ashley and her crisis of prayer? Paul Miller continues and says, when I finished praying, we went down to look through the dirt and the twigs. And there, sitting on a leaf, was the missing lens. Prayer made a difference after all.

[ 35 : 07 ] But what about Kim, their eight-year-old who was developmentally delayed? Though they had prayed when she was being born that God would keep her from harm, she was not healed. But God used her.

God used her to heal their family. Paul writes, Kim saved our family beginning with me. God used Kim to wake me up spiritually by redirecting his self-centered life and his self-providing plans and instead turning towards ministry, which he did for the rest of his life.

He writes this, we thought that the harm was a daughter with disabilities. But this was nothing compared to the danger of two proud and willful parents.

Because Kim was mute, Jill and I learned to listen. Her helplessness taught us to become helpless too. Kim brought Jesus into our home. We needed Jesus to get from one end of the day to the other.

We'd asked for a loaf of bread. Instead of giving us a stone, our Father had spread a feast for us in the wilderness. Kim had her faith placed in Jesus as well.

[ 36 : 35 ] And she testifies to his goodness in her life. Paul says, thank you, Jesus, for Kim.

Friends, this is the testimony of one who has seen God and who has learned through trials and hardships to ask, to seek, to knock.

Because we have a heavenly Father who delights to give good gifts to his children. Let's pray. Lord, we are thankful this morning to you for your steadfast love for your children that endures forever Lord, we confess how little we believe you how often, Lord, we don't want to risk trusting you how fearful we are to go to you in prayer Lord, we confess that we don't acknowledge you as you have revealed yourself to be and we make you small in our hearts Lord, how often we live our life apart from you or as if you weren't involved but Lord, we know that life in your kingdom is meant to be a life of seeking and asking and knocking and walking with you oh Lord, be our help in these things we pray in Jesus' name

Amen