

Ask God in Prayer

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[0 : 00] together now. So if you'd like to turn to the gospel according to Matthew. Sorry, Matthew chapter 7, and we're going to pick it up at verse 7. So Matthew 7 verse 7.

Matthew 7. Just before I read verses 7 through to 11, let me just say a couple of things about verse 7 because I won't be addressing everything. In verse 7 it says, ask, seek, and knock.

They're not actually the same thing, as though it's sort of emphasized like holy, holy, holy. Where it's emphasizing the importance of God's character, ask, seek, and knock are two, or sorry, three different things in particular. So tonight we're just going to be focusing on asking. So now hear God's word. 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 for seas, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks, it will be opened. Of which of you, of 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, I'm sorry, I'm going to stop, and I'm going to start again, and now you're going to pay attention, or you can leave.

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 for seas, 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? So what Jesus is saying here is really straightforward, to simply ask God for what you want. Ask God for what you want, or what you need, what you desire, even. So we're going to come back to that, but before we do, keep your Bibles open at Matthew 7. That would be great. Well, before I became into the ministry, as you know, I spent several years on a building site, and mainly on roos. I was once sat down eating my lunch between a guy from Liverpool that was built like giant haystacks. I mean, he was massive.

[3 : 11] He actually gave me a price to do his roof, and it was a good price, and I was thinking, you know, I could knock this out in about four days. I got there. The roof was nowhere near the same size as his drawing. And he says, it's three stories. I thought, great, no problem. I got there, there was no scaffolding. So despite that, I still liked him a little bit, that is. But I've sat down before him and this other guy from Manchester, and here I am, a Cornishman, sat in the middle of both of them. And I just, the conversation about God came up. And I said, well, have you ever prayed?

Did you ever learn how to pray when you were at school? Or, you know, yeah, there was a few things now and then. When we went to Sunday school, when we went to church, we heard a few things. We were told, I said, you know, I think what it comes down to is that you're just afraid to find out whether or not God actually exists. He said, no, I'm not. I said, all right, I set you a challenge.

This was the guy from Liverpool who was a carpenter. And I said to him, you go home tonight, and you ask God to reveal himself to you and see what happens. So we left for the day. Well, we went back to work after lunch and then we left for the day. The next day we're working on the same house and it got to lunchtime. And so I said to him, so did you do it?

This guy is massive, by the way. He says, no, I didn't do it. So I said, why didn't you do it? And he said, because I was afraid of what might happen.

Asking, especially to God, will reveal something about yourself as well. Now, after I've said, ask God in prayer, there's not much more that can be said.

Once I've instructed you this evening that you're to ask God in prayer for anything, what more can I say? What else have I got to say? Well, you'll notice that Jesus frames asking God in prayer in the context of a relationship between a father and a son in the context of how much more.

[5 : 39] And so if an earthly father gives to his son when his son asks him for something and doesn't give him the opposite of what he asked for, how much more will God give to you if you ask

him?

Now, the reason why this is so important is because even though we all live in the same world, we don't all live in the same world. Even though we all live in the same world, we don't all experience the same world in the same way. I'll give an example. If you've ever seen the film *Oliver Twist*.

Do you remember one of the first instructions *Oliver Twist* had about life? He was told by Fagan, now boy, money doesn't grow on trees, so you've got to pick a pocket or two.

No, that's a sin. You don't pick a pocket or two. But then *Oliver Twist* also learned when he was in the orphanage that even if you ask for more, it doesn't guarantee that you're going to get it.

See, the world treats different people differently. And the fact, or one of the facts that Jesus is trying to point out here, is that God treats us as his children. And children have to, by their very position in life, ask for things because they don't have them by themselves. They can't work for them. They can't get them. They can only get them by working for them. So what Jesus points out here is that asking God is normal for the Christian. Asking God is a normal part of the Christian life. You're to come to God and ask. Prayer is asking God for things that you don't have. In other words, you don't normally ask if you have. And if you don't have, then you need to ask for it, especially if you can't get it yourself. So ask God or else he can't give you it. Okay, does that make sense? If you don't ask God, then God has nothing to answer. If you don't ask God in prayer, then God can't give you it because you've not asked for it. That's what Jesus is saying here. If you want to receive the blessings and the gifts from God, you first have to go to God and ask for those things. They're not just going to come.

[8 : 16] But we tend to believe, or at least we are trying to be, perhaps with a false humility, to live this Christian life and say, well, I'm just going to be content with whatever God is going to give me. What Jesus says here, no, ask. Ask. It's right to be content with what God gives you.

It's wrong to go after sort of a health and wealth and prosperous life, and that's all that you want. But it's also equally wrong not to ask God to give you what you need or you want or your desires, because that is exactly what God wants you to do. Jesus uses this earthly illustration of an earthly father giving to his children what they ask for and then saying, how much more will God be like this with you? God treats you differently than he treats unbelievers. Okay, God, there is a discrimination, discrimination, and the discrimination is because now you find yourself in Christ. God treats you differently than unbelievers. He treats you as a son. He treats you as a child, and he listens to you when you pray. We're not addressing tonight, but it might be worth raising it at least. Does God listen to the prayer of an unbeliever? I don't think so. Unless it is the prayer, Lord, forgive me, I sinned, and I turn to you. But the psalmist is quite clear that God does not regard the prayer of someone who regards iniquity in their heart. Do most unbelievers regard iniquity in their heart if they're unrepentant?

Yes. So if you put the two together, does God listen to the prayers of unbelievers? Well, it seems very unlikely. All the more reason why people who are the children of God need to pray for them, because God does most definitely listen to our prayers and listen to our requests be for him.

We can speak about whether or not he listens to other people's prayers at another time. Now, you'll notice that when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, there are seven petitions. In other words, he told them to ask for seven things. In the Lord's Prayer that we sung at the beginning of this evening, there are seven petitions. We're asking God for seven things. Here's the first, hallowed be your name. We're not addressing God, our Father who art in heaven. That's addressing God.

But hallowed be your name is a request. You're asking God for something. You're asking for his name to be hallowed on earth as it is in heaven, as you see the prayer. That's number one. The second one is this. Your kingdom come. We're asking for God's kingdom to come. Number three, your will be done.

[11 : 05] On earth as it is in heaven, we're asking for God's will to be done. Number four, give us this day our daily bread. We're asking God to provide us with our needs. Number five, forgive us. Forgive us.

Number six, lead us not into temptation. And number seven, deliver us from evil. In other words, when you look at the Lord's Prayer, or at least the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples, you're told to ask for seven things in particular. In fact, most of the prayer, in fact, all of the prayer, apart from the very beginning, is all about asking God for something. So asking is a big part of our praying life, or it rather ought to be a really big part of our praying life.

Now, of course, when we come to God and we ask, there are some things we have to do. They're not conditions. They're just treating God as God and knowing our position. And of course, there are some things to avoid. And so firstly, then, I'm going to lay out a few differences here.

But the first difference is the one between a testimony and scripture. Prayer, firstly, is a part of our fellowship with God. It's how we stay close to God, as you would stay close to anybody else. You want to stay close to your husband, it's advisable that you speak to him.

You want to stay close to your wife, it's advisable that you speak to her. You want to stay close to your children or anybody else, yes, you're smiling, but it's true, you speak to them. If you want things to break down, then things break down by not speaking. And things break down very, very quickly, and it's no different with our relationship with God. The moment we sort of cease in a communication, things become, you know, we haven't spoken for a while and now I'm feeling a bit awkward.

[12:58] Speaking to God in prayer is essential for fellowship, it's essential for relationship. But we must also receive instruction about prayer. And you can't get that from a story.

You can only get it from scripture. You can get it from a scriptural story, but you can't get it from, let's say, a testimony. And so I'm going to explain why. Over the past six or so months, I've read several books on prayer, and I've only come across two that focus primarily on scripture. At least 10 of the books that I've read on prayer are full, chock full of stories. Now, I don't mind reading about other people's stories, I don't mind reading about other people's testimonies, but I'm not learning anything.

I'm learning what God has done in somebody else's life, but that doesn't teach me anything.

Because a testimony can't teach me. A testimony can bring glory to God. A testimony can tell me what God has done for someone else. But I can't infer from their story that God's going to do the same thing for me. And so while the stories are well-meaning, while the stories are encouraging, while the stories bring great glory to God, they don't actually teach me anything.

They shine a wonderful light on God, and they can perhaps give me encouragement to say, you know, continue praying. But sometimes these stories are written in such a way and are placed into the books in such a way to say, or at least to infer, God can do for you what he's done for me.

Well, that's certainly true. God can do for you what he's done for me, but there's no guarantee that he will. What the writers of these books mistake, or at least, you know, putting myself out here, is that they're confusing God's ability with God's will. God has the ability to do for you what he has done for somebody else, but they're a different person, and so are you. And God's will for your life may not be the same as God's will for their life, and so you have a totally different story. So the story's encouraging. It's well-meaning, but it's misplaced. It's a testimony, but it's not instruction. God's ability is the same towards all people wherever he is, but God's will is not. And so we can find great encouragement that God is still answering the prayers of people, but that's no good if he's not answering our prayers. I mean, it doesn't matter how many people's prayers that I've read and get encouragement from, I only need to have God not answering my prayers for me to be incredibly discouraged. So my praying life matters way more than reading the praying life of other people. It doesn't mean that they're wrong. It just doesn't mean that they're as helpful as they appear to be or are meant to be in these books that they are written in. So many believers can read these stories and be led astray on the continual hope, on the continual hope that God will do for me in my life what he's done for that person in their life, and that may be true. It may be true. The trouble is when it doesn't pan out that way and it doesn't happen. The Christian begins to realize who's read that story that their whole hope was based on somebody else's story and not scripture. Suddenly it begins to dawn on them. Suddenly it begins to become clear that their hope and their trust and their excitement was based on somebody else's testimony rather than the word of God itself. And then all of a sudden a little bit of bitterness creeps in because God isn't doing for me what he has done for somebody else. And then even worse, the stories end up making, or at least the absence of the stories, you know, I'm not being topped up here, can make me feel, or at least another follower of Jesus feel, is that they're not as good as that other person. That they have a story to tell of great answers to prayer, but I don't have any. And so let me just say that while these stories are well-meaning, while they are encouraging, and while they bring glory to God, they most definitely bring glory to God, they are misused when they are used in a way to give instruction to other believers. They are misused when they are used in such a way where they are to infer to other believers that they can expect the same.

[17 : 44] Now, a scriptural story can do that. You take the sinful woman who wept and washed Jesus' feet and she was forgiven. That story teaches us that we can be forgiven by Jesus like she was forgiven by Jesus.

Okay, because that's what the story's meant to teach. But is God's ability and God's will the same? No, because I'm not that woman, and that woman's not me, and neither are you. And how God saved you, even though he used his same son, the Lord Jesus Christ, he didn't do it in the same way. And so you know deep in your heart that you're a different person.

And you know it doesn't matter how many stories you read, what really matters is whether or not you get your prayers answered by God. So stories are great, but they are only testimonies. And they are not, they are most definitely not a formula. That if you get the formula right, that somehow God will answer your prayers. And the formula often goes like this. If you do this and that, and God does this and that, no sorry, if you do this and that, and then you follow it up with this and that, God will do the next one. So if you do term one and follow it up with term two, then God will do term three. And with a little bit of insight, you can begin to see that's what's really happening.

That people begin to build their hope on a story and think that there's some kind of magic formula that they haven't quite found out yet. When there is no formula, you simply ask your own father in heaven for what you desire, what you want, and what you need. And so all of this can be avoided in terms of being captured by a story. If we simply remember that yes, God can do for me what he's done for somebody else. But God is under no compulsion to do it because God's will for me in a different time and in a different season and I'm a different person is going to be different simply by the fact that I am not that other person. But God's will will always be the best thing for my life.

And so when you pray that God's ability will fulfill his will for my life, whatever that looks like, it is most definitely the best thing that could ever happen to you.

[20 : 22] I don't want you to be discouraged, but neither do I want you to live under a false hope. I want you to be encouraged by the simple fact that Jesus teaches you here that you have your own father and your own prayer life matters. In other words, have your own story of how God has worked in your life and when you've asked him for something, he has answered just like he said he would.

But secondly then, the Lord knows what we need. The Lord knows what we need even before we ask him. In Matthew 6, Jesus teaches his disciples this very truth that God knows what we need even before we ask him. But what follows from this often is, well, I don't need to ask him then. No, listen to what Jesus says. The Lord knows what you need even before you ask him. Doesn't mean the Lord knows what you need, so therefore you don't have to ask him. He didn't say that. He said the Lord knows what you need even before you ask him. In other words, still ask because ask is how we receive the blessings from God. It doesn't follow that if God knows it that we don't have to ask him. No, Jesus says, no, you ask him anyway because that's how God answers prayer. That's how God gives you what you need. So God sees that you need it and now he asks you to ask for it, even though God's continual blessings towards you is that you get what you get. But it's also equally true that if you're not asking, as we'll see later, you're not necessarily getting everything. Okay? If you're not asking, you're not necessarily getting everything. And when we ask, we're not to do it in a repetitious fashion, as if to say,

God hasn't heard or God really doesn't know my need. If you look at Paul and Jesus in particular, which we'll see at another time, they are both people who had the same prayer which they repeated several times and both were met with refusal. So repetition isn't necessarily wrong, but the kind of repetition that is wrong is the repetition where you're trying to convince God that, look, I don't think you really understand what I need. And so you're repeating so as to inform God how things really are. You don't need to do that. God knows what you need even before you ask him.

Now, before we get on to the issue then of, well, if I don't ask him for what I need or I ask him for what I need, can I ask him for what I like? Can I ask God for what I like? Well, first, I still think we need to really understand what it means when God says that he knows what we need even before we ask him. So I'm going to try and illustrate this in a fairly simple way if I can. Now, we live in a world that's far more complicated than the world that Jesus lived in. When Jesus lived in this world and he ministered amongst the people, life was fairly basic, fairly straightforward. You know, there wasn't small print in his world, although you could argue that the Pharisees had plenty of that, but by and large it was a simple world compared to the world that we live in now.

The trouble is, is that sometimes our praying life thinks that God can't keep up with the complexity, that we read these stories and think, well, it was pretty basic back then, but my world's a lot more complicated than this world. And so I'll try and sort it out myself rather than go to God and ask him to sort it out because it's way more complicated now. Back then, Jesus teaches his people to pray for daily bread, but we don't need that because we can do a weekly shop, right? Back then, a day's wages was for a day's work, but back now we have contracts and jobs that last at least longer than a day.

[24 : 28] So you tell me which world makes a person more dependent on prayer. It seems that as the world has become more complex, that the praying life of the believer has become less, simply because the world has changed. We live in a world of 25-year mortgages. We live in a world where we have insurance.

We live in a world where we have job contracts. We live in a world where we have small print. In Jesus' world, or at least the world that is spoken of here, there's none of that. But a pray for your daily bread, not knowing where it's going to come the next day because you don't, you can't keep your employer to the contract you've got, and you can't guarantee there's going to be any work. And you've not got no 25-year mortgage, and so you may not even have a house tomorrow, let alone anything else. Which world do you think, environment do you think, would cause a person to pray more? I would argue that world does. And so what seems to have happened is that in a far more complex world, we take care of our needs more than God does. We almost don't need God. I can do a weekly shop. I don't need to pray for my daily bread, right? And so God, though you don't mean it to happen, tends to go out of the picture because the world has changed, and unfortunately, the world has changed the way we pray. Our prayer is less dependent because we have become more dependent. Instead of it being a daily need, we have weekly or monthly or yearly needs. But we've got a few, we've got a bit to get us by. And so I think because of that truth, we have become less dependent. We ask God less for things in prayer because we live in a complex world. Whereas if the world was far more basic and simple, we would be much more reliant on God. A world where your daily bread was your daily need, or rather, your daily need was your daily bread, rather than a world full of contracts and 25-year mortgages and insurance and small print. The world has not only changed our needs, but has also changed the way we come to God and ask him to fulfill our needs. We seem to be leaving God out of a complex world, when actually the more complex it is, the more we actually need God.

Thirdly then, you don't have, or sorry, we don't have because we don't ask. In James 4.2, he makes it quite clear that we don't have because we don't ask. And the verse doesn't mean the opposite of what it says. In other words, James is not saying, if you didn't ask, you'd get it anyway.

Anyway, now growing up, I used to think this was true. I can remember once having an argument with a vicar over the sovereignty of God. I didn't even understand what sovereignty meant, but I knew that it had something to do with God being in control. And I just said to him, well, if God's in control of everything, then I really don't need the prayer. Well, it's soon been pointed out to me over years of living now, after that conversation, that even though it's true that God gives exactly what I need and God directs the course of my life and God is sovereign over everything, it is equally true that some things can be missing from my life simply due to the fact that I've not asked God for them.

You do not have because you do not ask. It doesn't mean you would have had them anyway. You don't have them because you've not asked for them. Both Jesus and James are absolutely clear that the way to receive happens by asking. If you want something, then you ask for it. If you want something from God, then you ask God for it. You focus on God's name, God's kingdom, God's will, where you're so that your motivation, your focus is right. But if you want it, you've got to ask for it.

[28 : 45] But again, I don't think we ask nearly enough or as much as we should. Jesus is expecting us to ask God for a whole lot more than what we do. And Jesus is expecting us to ask God a whole lot more often than what we do. I just don't think we ask God enough. James does give a warning, however, if you ask God and focus on your personal desires of self-indulgence and personal gain. Do you remember the song, Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes-Benz? My friends will drive Porsches, you must make amends.

I can't remember the next line. But give me a Mercedes-Benz. And God says, yeah, sure. No, he doesn't. If you pray and focus on your own sort of self-indulgent desires, not just desires, self-indulgent desires, that's always going to be met with a no. James says, you're asking, you've

got the asking bit right. The bit that you've actually got wrong is that you're thinking about yourself way too often. And you're thinking about what you can have for yourself way too much. That's why you're not getting. And so the person that James has in mind when he speaks like that is the person who considers prayer as simply a means of getting what they want. And if they don't get what they want, then guess what happens? They don't pray. Okay. It's like the man in James 1 who, you know, he's not getting his prayers answered. And God's already told him that he's not going to answer his prayers because he's double-minded in all his ways. One day he wakes up and he wants to be like Jesus. The next day he wakes up and he doesn't want to be like Jesus. And instead of telling himself that he really ought to be, he just continues not to be and then expects his prayers to be answered. And James says, it's just not going to happen. You're just kidding yourself. And so James really has that person in mind, the person who says, well, there's really no point to praying if I can't get what I want. And James would agree, yeah, there is no point in praying because you're not going to get it. This leaves the issue then, an important issue of, well, is it possible for me to have what I desire? Or is prayer only reserved for God's desires? Can I have what I want? Or do I constantly have to have what God wants to give me? Okay. Does that make sense? Can I have what I want?

Or do I only have to have what God wants to give me? In other words, is it only about God's will or does my will come into it? Can I ask God for something that I want? So after you've accepted the will of God, after you pray in Jesus' name, after you focus on the kingdom of God, the question still remains, if I'm all the above and if my motives are right and if I'm right with God, is it possible for me to have what I want when I ask? Or is my praying just to change what I want to what God wants for me? In other words, do my desires have any value or do my desires only have value when they become the same as God's? Does my will have real value and validity or does it only have real value and validity when it becomes the same as God's? In other words, do I only get what I want when I want the same as God? Or can I actually have something that I desire? Well, this is what the psalmist says because the scripture does answer that question. The psalmist puts it like this, delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart. I'm going to say it again, then I'm going to explain it. Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart. And what the psalmist means by this is this, that when you delight yourself in the Lord, okay, when you delight yourself in the Lord, the Lord meets the desires of your heart.

Still no clearer? Let me say it again. When you delight yourself in the Lord, the Lord meets the desires of your heart. In other words, the Lord doesn't meet the desires of your heart by giving you something else.

[33 : 13] The Lord meets the desires of your heart by giving you himself. And it's at that point when you're praying that you begin to realize whether or not you really want the Lord or you want something else.

It's at that point that you actually begin to realize what your chief desire really is. that if the Lord can satisfy the needs of our heart, that if the Lord can meet all the needs of our heart and we're still wanting something else, what is that really telling us about our relationship with the Lord? It tells us, yes, we love him, but we still want something different.

It's a real test of our will and our character before God. And so there only remains one question left. And that is, well, can I not have both? Okay, can I not love God with all my heart, with all my strength, with all my soul, and have?

And God answered that for us this morning with Solomon. Yes. It was because Solomon chose God first that God gave him all this other stuff. Did Jesus not say, seek ye first the kingdom of God and all these things will be added unto you?

[34 : 42] So yes, you can have the desires of your heart that are genuinely your desires, but they come in an order. And the order is not a condition in such that you have to do this in order to get that.

It's simply God getting us as people to treat him as he is. The God. The one true God. The triune God of Scripture.

Put God first. And so in conclusion, if we don't ask God, then God has got nothing to answer. If we don't ask God, God has got nothing to answer.

But when we ask God, our focus needs to be on God as well as the desires that we have. It cannot just be, I want this, I want that, and I want it now.

We can come to God for anything and ask him for anything. And yes, God changes us through prayers. Yes, God even opens up our heart to see what we really want through not answering our prayers.

[35 : 50] But above all, Jesus says this, ask, and it will be given to you. Ask, and it will be given to you. And as the Scripture says, those who ask, God is able to do far more than we can ask or think.

More? You can actually do more than I can ask? You can actually do more than I can think?

Really? That's the God that we pray to.

So Jesus says, ask, and it will be given to you. And we ought to take Jesus at his very words.

Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen.