

“Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and tell him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, 6 because a friend of mine who is on a journey has come to me, and I do not have anything to set before him.’ 7 And the one inside replies, ‘Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can’t get up and give it to you.’ 8 I tell you, even if he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his bold persistence, he will get up and give him as much as he needs. 9 “I tell you, keep asking, and it will be given to you. Keep seeking, and you will find. Keep knocking, and it will be opened to you. 10 For everyone who asks receives. The one who seeks finds. And to the one who knocks, it will be opened. 11 “What father among you, if your son asks for bread, would give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, would give him a snake instead of a fish? 12 Or if he asks for an egg, would give him a scorpion? 13 If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?”

I was wasting my time on Twitter a few weeks ago, and I read a tweet where a man was talking about a struggle he was going through. He then said, “Just send good thoughts. I don’t want any prayers, they don’t work.” Now, some people were defending prayer against what he said. But I was also surprised at what some others said. “Good thoughts are the same as prayers.” No. They’re not. Prayer is when you speak to God Almighty, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, the One who is infinite and hears everything: and Who has the power to answer what you request and the means through which to do it. It’s not just thinking about something with your brain. The power of prayer is in the connection it has with the Almighty God who can do what we need. Without God to answer that prayer, it would be useless: no more powerful than a good thought.

Ask, Seek, and Knock

I. Remember who you’re asking

But today’s text doesn’t talk about the POWER of God. It talks about the NATURE of God in comparison with earthly fathers, how He wants to give us good gifts. Jesus contrasts the God the Father in heaven with an earthly father. And it’s always interesting how He throws these terms around without us sometimes giving much thought to it. It’s almost in passing as he says, **If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?”** Did you catch that little rider on that - you then, though you are EVIL. Whoa! There’s a huge statement on humanity, that slaps us all in the face. You’re all evil. So am I. I’m born with this sinfulness within that Jesus doesn’t call “good.” He doesn’t mask it with good intentions. He calls it evil.

This wickedness blinds us to other people’s needs in many ways. We tend to look only to what we need, and not what others need. We think of ourselves much more highly than we ought. We miss out on opportunities to help and reach out to people because of this selfish evil within. It’s sad to see how this wickedness is causing more and more child abuse and neglect in our society than ever before. Children are being withheld from the basic necessities and protections they used to get from their parents and grandparents.

But even though we are sinfully EVIL by nature, most parents by nature still want to give good things to their children. Most won't maliciously give their children snakes and scorpions to hurt them. Thank God for that! This desire is given us by God and still works through the evil. It hasn't been completely lost in the Fall. But Jesus says that if we can do this good while still having evil within, then just imagine what a HOLY and PERFECT GOD will give you! He knows what you need more than your own parents do. He has better gifts than bread and fish, and He has the power and ability and the WILL to help.

So prayer starts with a proper vision of WHO GOD IS! Just recently I saw another video online of a young teenage girl putting her dog in the dryer for a couple spins. She laughed and thought it was funny. It was a mean thing to do to a dog who trusted her and thought she loved her. That's how some envision God to be. But Jesus emphasizes that God is a giver of BETTER gifts than any human father could think of! Do you think of God in this way? If you don't, then you won't want to pray. You won't take the time to pray. You will assume that it is worthless and a waste of time because He doesn't really care at all. But if you look at the Bible and read about all the GOOD things God has done for His people, you will be more encouraged to pray and want to pray to Him.

II. Think about how to pray

Ask, seek, and knock. The words sound simple enough. But when you look into the tense of the verbs there's an interesting little nuance. It's not just a command to do it once and hurry up with it. They are all commands that are in the present tense, which means that they are to be done continually. Don't just do it once and get it over with. Keep on doing it.

Maybe there's a little rebuke of the stubborn side of us. We don't like to beg. If we do ask for it, we'll only do it once. Sometimes we can be impatient and get angry when we don't get what we want right away. Think about begging. It can be a sign of weakness when a parent has to beg his child to do something. As a sign of respect you should do it the first time you've been asked by your parent. But we aren't the parents in this equation. We are the children. So some might wonder if this is supposed to like a divine badgering. "Can I? Can I? Can I? Please. Please. Please. Please." As if you can wear God out - irritate Him so much that He finally gives in and says, "Fine! Have it your way." But how can you wear God out?

Actually, there is at least one example of God speaking as if He were getting worn out. In Malachi chapter 2 the prophet said to the Israelites,

You have wearied the LORD with your words.

"How have we wearied him?" you ask.

By saying, "All who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD, and he is pleased with them" or

"Where is the God of justice?"

Even the infinite and holy God limits Himself with His patience. There are also times that God gives us what we want in frustration with us. The first king that God gave the Israelites was a result of their own stubborn and persistent demands for one, even though He warned against having a king.

But that being said, it isn't in keeping with God to act like a parent who just gets worn down with our begging. This persistence, to keep on asking, keep on seeking, and keep on knocking, seems to be just encouraging us not to be too proud to beg, not to be impatient, and not to give up on talking to God, especially when we are in

need. He commands us to knock. He commands us to seek. He commands us to ask. Why? Because He wants to build our FAITH in Him. He leads us to APPRECIATE what we do receive all the more and remember where it has to come from.

Think about the couple that has a hard time having children. They go through periods of anger and frustration. They go through so many more prayers than the couple who is given children so easily. If they are then granted their request, they are so thankful when the child comes out healthy. They tend to thank God so much more than the couple that barely offered any prayers. Through the pain and the frustration and the waiting, God blessed them in ways they didn't even know.

There's a helplessness to prayer in a sense. No matter how much you knock on a huge locked door you don't have the power to open it. Only the One on the inside has the power to open it. So prayer is passive in the sense that we need our God - who is on the other side of the equation to open the door for us. If it is against His will, then it won't be opened no matter how much we knock. We have to remember that this instruction to prayer is after Jesus teaches us the Lord's Prayer which includes, "**THY will be done,**" not MY will be done.

But there may be some human involvement too in this. When you SEEK something, you also have to sometimes get up and look for it, overturn some cushions, and retrace your steps. Just this past week my daughter couldn't find her wallet, which I can commiserate with because it happens to me ALL the time. So we went through the process together. We looked through areas together. I finally went out to her car and found it on the floor in the back seat. She was sure that she looked there, but a fresh set of eyes helped her to find it in plain sight. Sometimes prayer might be like that too. You're praying for a door to open for you, but maybe you just haven't been looking for the door while you were praying. Maybe by discussing your needs with a friend, he or she could help you in seeking what you're praying for. Sometimes prayer CAN be a substitute for laziness, and sometimes God wants us to be the answer to our own prayer by doing something about it. My teacher at the Seminary mentioned this when it came to the Mission Prayer Jesus had the disciples pray - to send more workers out in the harvest. He turned to them and said, "Surprise! You're it!" Maybe the answer to your prayers is something that God wants you to figure out and look for - it's not just going to fall out of the sky and hit you in the head.

III. Contemplate WHAT you're asking for

The final thing I want us to look at today is the CONTENT of what exactly we are praying for. In the examples that Jesus uses with prayer He is talking about the basic necessities of life. A man asks for a couple of loaves of bread to help feed his friend who has come to him. He wants to be a good host. The son asks the father for bread or for fish: basic things to eat and feed on. He's not asking for riches or power or fame. But here's where there's an interesting twist at the end of what He says. **How much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?** Throughout the illustration He's talking about bread and fish, but then at the end He brings in the HOLY SPIRIT. Why does He do that? And what's the significance of it?

When you have such a promise from Jesus that when you keep on asking, seeking and knocking that the door WILL BE opened, what might you think? This is an open promise that I CAN GET WHATEVER I WANT. Then God the Father can become my sugar daddy - my bread and fish daddy. I can be the spoiled little girl from Willy Wonka and demand everything I want from daddy. But Jesus changes the object of our prayers to

the spiritual. Think about it, all of the things from the Lord's Prayer - six of the seven petitions are SPIRITUAL and only one is physical. And the only thing we ask for is daily BREAD. That's it. No steak and potatoes. Just what I need to get by.

Why does Jesus want us to ask for the Holy Spirit? If anyone knows the will of God, it is God the Holy Spirit, since He also is God. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, **“no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us.”** (1 Co 2:11–12) The Holy Spirit opens our eyes to what is essential and what is good. He tells us what we need instead of focusing our eyes and our hearts on what we WANT! Sometimes the things we are praying for and want so badly are a result of us not seeing straight, coming from the evil within. But if we pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance, then maybe He'll get us to pray for things that will be good for us.

And maybe here too we could think about the seeking aspect of prayer. The Holy Spirit doesn't just fill us through prayer. We need to seek His guidance through the reading the Word and listening to the Word. Seeking takes time and effort of actually studying the Bible, going to Bible class, and coming to church. Through these Means the Holy Spirit gets our minds and our prayers focused in the RIGHT direction, in line with the will of God in our prayers.

Let's go back to the Master of this prayer lesson: Jesus. He didn't just tell us how to pray. He showed us what a faithful prayer life looks like. He went off and prayed on a regular basis - much more than we ever do. Think of His prayer in Gethsemane. **“Take this cup from me. Yet not my will, but your will be done.”** The Father said “no” to His Son in the hour of His greatest need! But in this seeming “no” He was saying “yes” to us. In something that ended up being a curse for Jesus, it became a blessing to us. When He closed the door to Jesus life of humility, He opened the door to our life of eternity in heaven. Jesus was bitten by the snake of death and the scorpion of God's wrath, but He came out alive. In the end of it all, Jesus' will was done and God's will was done - Jesus was the answer to His own prayer and the world's sins were paid for. His prayer was powerful and effective in the loving Father's way. So you see how prayer works. It's not a pointless exercise for lazy people. It's a means of communicating with our holy, powerful, and gracious God who wants to give us the best gifts that we need, so much more than bread and fish.

A few years ago my parents went back to their home town for a wedding or something. They decided to stay at a hotel instead of staying with some old friends. When their old friends found out that they had stayed at a hotel, the man was pretty angry with my dad. He said to him in an angry voice, “That was a STUPID thing to do!” I thought he was kind of harsh, but he really wanted them to come. He didn't want them to feel like they weren't welcome. He made no bones about it, “You better call next time!”

Maybe that illustration helps you see how God feels about us praying. Jesus isn't as harsh, but He still is giving a command. Keep on asking, keep on seeking, and keep on knocking. His house is full of good and gracious gifts, and God wants to open His doors to you. He promises that your prayers will be answered and you will be given better gifts than you were even asking for, as the Holy Spirit leads you to Jesus and all of His gifts of grace, mercy, life and salvation. So why not get your knuckles sore and get to knocking? You never know what kind of doors will be opened for you. Amen.