

## MATT 7.7-11: KEEP PRAYING!

[Chelmsford 1 July 2012]

Evelyn Christenson tells the story of how her husband, an American Baptist minister, one day walked into his church and saw the caretaker fairly dripping with perspiration, absolutely exhausted from vacuuming the church. *"Alas, as my husband saw him struggling with the vacuum cleaner, he looked down and saw there lying on the floor was the plug. The dear man had vacuumed the whole auditorium, but didn't have the plug in the socket.... Isn't that what happens to many of us? We work, we pull, we struggle, and we plan until we're utterly exhausted, but we have forgotten to plug in to the source of power. And that source of power is prayer - the 'effectual fervent prayer' of a righteous person avails much"*.

Jesus says: **"Ask, and you will receive; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you"**. This morning I want to focus on these words of Jesus and thereby encourage you – and myself! - to pray, and pray, and pray.

### 1. Pray

**"Ask, and you will receive; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks will receive, and anyone who seeks will find, and the door will be opened to those who knock" (7.7-8)**

In other words Jesus says: *'Get down to the actual business of praying'*. He doesn't say: *"Think about praying - get yourself in the right mood for praying"*. Prayer is not a matter of deliberating or feeling, it is a matter of doing.  
**Ask... seek... knock.**

Yes, of course ***there is more to prayer than 'asking'***

- In the first place prayer involves ***listening*** to God. In recent years this has become for me an increasingly important aspect of prayer - I have found it a rewarding experience to take time to meditate on God's word and through my meditation to hear God speaking into all kinds of areas of my life. Prayer is listening.
- Prayer too involves ***worshipping God - praising*** God for all that he is and ***thanking*** God for all that he has done for us. Prayer also involves ***acknowledging our sin*** before God and seeking his forgiveness. Prayer is multi-faceted.
- But prayer also involves ***asking - seeking - knocking***.

But someone might object: *"Does God need to be told what we lack?"*

Why Jesus himself earlier in the Sermon on the Mount said that our Heavenly Father will care for us because he **"knows"** our needs (6.32)

So why then ask? Why not simply trust God to meet our needs?

Why not simply say to God *"Your will be done"* or *"I'll take whatever you give"*?

Yes: God does know what we need. ***But he only gives as we express our conscious***

***need of him and our humble dependence upon him.***

He waits for us to recognize our need - and to turn to him in humility.

That is why Jesus says: "**Ask and you will receive**"; and why later James adds "**You do not have what you want because you do not ask God for it**" (Jas 4.2)

Let's not be afraid to ask God for what we need.

## 2. Pray persistently

This need for persistence is highlighted in Luke's setting of these words of Jesus. For Luke precedes the exhortation of Jesus to "**ask, seek, knock**" with the parable of the so-called ***Grumpy Neighbour***.

Lk 11:5-8 Jesus said to his disciples: "**Suppose one of you should go to a friend's house at midnight and say, 'Friend, let me borrow three loaves of bread. A friend of mine who is on a journey has just come to my house, and I haven't got any food for him!' And suppose your friends should answer from inside, 'Don't bother me! The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can't get up and give you anything'. Well, what then? I tell you that even if he will not get up and give you everything you need because you are his friend, yet he will get up and give you everything you need because you are not ashamed to keep on asking**"

Jesus adds "**So I say to you: ask and you will receive, seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you**" (11.9)

I.e. The Lukan context makes it clear that Jesus is saying: "*Don't give up on praying - persist in asking until God answers your prayer*".

But even if we only had Matthew's Gospel this thought of persistency would still be present.

- In the first place, the three verbs (**ask - seek - knock**) give the feel of an ascending scale of urgency. For instance, if a child wants something, and sees that his mother is near and visible, he *asks*; if she is neither near nor visible, he *seeks*; and if he discovers that she has locked herself in her room, then he *knocks*. One thing for certain, if a child wants something badly, then he doesn't give up.
- Secondly, all three verbs are in the *present tense* - they are present imperatives, best translated: "**keep on asking - keep on seeking - keep on knocking**". Jesus is encouraging us to be persistent in making known our needs to God.

Why do we have to be persistent in our praying?

Is God a mean old codger, who only gives gifts to his children rather grudgingly?

No! ***Sometimes God wants to see if we are really being serious about our praying.***

For if we don't want what we are asking enough to be persistent, then we can't want it very much - we are simply playing around with prayer - and God doesn't answer tepid prayers.

Sometimes, when God does not appear to be answering our prayers, he is in fact testing us - "*Are you really serious about that?*"

Be persistent in your praying!

### 3 Pray expectantly

In the first place, we can pray expectantly because we know that *God will not refuse our prayers* - he will answer them.

- "Ask, and you **WILL** receive; seek, and you **WILL** find; knock, and the door **WILL** be opened to you". Note, Jesus does not say you "may" receive, but you "will".
- Jesus goes on to underline the certainty of God's response: For "everyone who asks receives, and anyone who seeks finds, and the door will be opened to those who know" (7.7-8)

Secondly, we can pray expectantly because we know that God will not mock our prayers. In the context of encouraging us to pray Jesus tells three very short parables:

- **Would any of you who are fathers give your son a stone when he asks for bread?** (7.9)
- **Or would you give him a snake when he asks for fish?** (7.10)
- To these two parables we may add the other little parable found in Lk 11.12: "**Or would you give him a scorpion when he asks for an egg?**"

God does not play dirty tricks on his children

- *He doesn't give a stone instead of bread.* The contrast between bread and a stone seems a little strange, until we realise that the little round limestone stones on the shores of Lake Galilee were exactly the shape and colour of the little loaves 1C Palestinian women used to bake - the key difference between the stones and the loaves were that the former were impossible to eat.
- *He doesn't give a snake instead of a fish.* Or perhaps better, he doesn't give an eel instead of a fish. According to Jewish food laws an eel couldn't be eaten, because an eel was an unclean fish (see Lev 11.12). To give an eel would be to mock a son's hunger.
- *He doesn't give a scorpion instead of an egg.* A scorpion is a dangerous animal: it clutches its victim in its lobster-like claws, and with its tail gives the nastiest and most painful of stings. Why the comparison of a scorpion with an egg? I'm told that when a scorpion is at rest, its claws and tails are folded in - furthermore, there is a pale kind of scorpion, which, when folded up, would look exactly like an egg. But God isn't into the business of giving his children painful surprises.

Jesus adds: "**Bad as you are, you know how to give good things to your children. How much more then will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!**" (7.11)

Precisely because God wants to give us good things, we can pray expectantly. Indeed, *where expectancy is not present, then there prayers are not answered.*

Where prayers are simply pious hopes or mere wishes, nothing happens

- In the context of praying for wisdom James writes: "**You should pray to God... because God gives generously and graciously to all. But when you pray, you must believe and not doubt at all**" (Jas 1.5,6:
- In the context of healing a disturbed child Jesus himself said: "**When you pray**

**and ask for something, believe that you have received it, and you will be given whatever you ask for" (Mk 11.24)**

Wow: doesn't that make you excited?

At first sight *prayer appears to be like an Aladdin's lamp* - the moment we rub our prayer lamp God our servant instantly appears to come and do our bidding.

But the moment we put it that way, we realise that we have got it wrong.

***Prayer is not a form of magic - for we are dealing with no mere genie, but with Almighty God.***

In no way can God be manipulated, however much faith we may have - indeed, God would not be much of a God, he if could be manipulated in such a manner.

Furthermore, *our own experience teaches us that not all our prayers are answered in the way we want* - and thank God they are not.

Just imagine the strain it would impose on us if we knew that we would be certain to get everything we asked. If we were at all self-aware, we would scarcely dare to pray, because we would be all too conscious of the limitations of our wisdom.

We may imagine we are asking for bread, but in the end the bread we are asking for may prove a stone.

God is no genie - he is our Father - and he gives what he deems best for us.

Just as wise parents would never give their children everything they asked for, so God our Heavenly Father only wants to give us good gifts.

#### **4. Pray for God's best**

What are we to pray for in particular?

What are the good things Jesus would encourage us to ask God for?

A new car? A new house? A £500,000 win on the lottery?

The parallel passage in Lk 11 is instructive - for there we find a slightly different form of words. Jesus says "**Bad as you are, you know how to give good things to your children. How much more then will the Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!**" (Lk 11:13).

In Matthew's Gospel Jesus speaks of our heavenly Father giving **good things** - in Luke's Gospel of him giving **the Holy Spirit**.

God is good. He does not limit us to the things for which we may pray - he is interested in every aspect of our lives - things both great and small.

But the clear implication of combining Mat 7.11 with Lk 11.13 is that ***God's very best is the gift of his Holy Spirit***

This is not surprising, when you think about it.

- For the Holy Spirit = the "*presence of Jesus in his absence*".
- He is "**the Helper**", the one who comes alongside, to guide, strengthen, to enable us to cope with each & every experience in life.

When it comes to praying, Jesus encourages us to pray first and foremost not for material things like cars & houses, but rather for a greater experience of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

And isn't that what most of us need? Yes, if we have committed our lives to the Lord Jesus, God has already blessed us with his Spirit.

But if the truth be told most of us are not living our lives in the power of the Spirit.

Time and again through our sinfulness and selfishness we quench the Holy Spirit.

How we need to know God at work in our lives in a new way.

Let's pray - and keep on praying - that we may be filled afresh with the Holy Spirit

Interestingly, even without the alternative reading to be found in Luke's Gospel, the thrust of Jesus' teaching on prayer here in Matthew would still be the same.

For *in the light of the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, it is clear that the good things for which Jesus encourages his disciples to pray are things which relate to the Kingdom.*

- Over against people's concern for material things such as food, drink & clothing Jesus said, "**Be concerned above everything else with the Kingdom of God and what he requires of you**" (6.32)
- The first petition in the Lord's prayer is "**Your kingdom come**" (6.10)
- Within the context of the Sermon on the Mount it is clear that *the kingdom of heaven requires poverty of spirit, purity of heart, truth, compassion, a non-retaliatory spirit, a life of integrity.*

Or to put it another way, to pray for the Kingdom to come is to pray that God's Spirit will rule in our hearts and lives. In other words to pray for the Kingdom is to pray that we will so be in step with the Spirit that our lives will exhibit the fruit of the Spirit

Jesus says

- *pray* - and when you do so, don't be vague in your praying, be specific
- *pray persistently* - show you really mean business and keep on praying
- *pray expectantly* - be confident & don't doubt that God is listening to your prayers
- *keep on praying that God will give you his very best* - even his Spirit - so that his kingdom will come into your heart, soul and mind.