

The Simplicity of Prayer

Great to see you guys. If you have a bible, go with me once again to **Matthew 7**. If you're new, we as a church have been working our way through the **book of Matthew** in the bible, which is a book all about Jesus, his life, his ministry, and life in what he calls "the kingdom of God." And in a lot of the past several months, Jesus has touched on some very **outward, interpersonal aspects** of our lives—things like honesty in our dealings with others, anger and resentment towards others, how we relate to those that are *opposed* to us, how we approach sex and sexual expression, and all sorts of other things. For the *most* part, he has been discussing how we relate to other people as followers of Jesus—our **horizontal** relationships.

But in **today's passage**, Jesus is going to pivot and talk at least *primarily* about the **vertical relationship** between us and God himself. And even *more* specifically, how we *communicate* to God himself. Today we're going to be talking largely about *prayer*. Now prayer is an interesting thing to discuss in a room full of followers of Jesus, and here's why: I won't do this, but my guess is that if I were to **go around the room** right now and ask how many of us think that as followers of Jesus, we *should* pray, I would bet every hand would go up. If I were to take it a step *further* and ask how many of us believe we should pray *often* or *frequently*, I bet most every hand would *stay* up. But *then*, if I were to ask *how many of us pray and pray frequently—how many of us feel like our prayer lives are anything close to what we know they should be*, I bet a lot of hands would go *down*.

And what's *more* is that *prayer itself* is **not** really **a very complicated idea**, right? Maybe with something else like bible reading, there's a gap in our *understanding* that prevents us from excelling in it (we don't *understand* what we're reading, don't know how to interpret or apply certain things, etc.). But with prayer, there's not really a lot of *complexity*. I mean Jesus said it just a moment ago in our Scripture reading: **prayer**, at the end of the day is just **asking**. It's simply going before God and *asking* him to do something or accomplish something or speak something or help with something. That in itself is a very simple idea.

So here's **my point**: we all know we should pray. We all know we should pray *often*. We all on some level understand the *concept* of prayer. And yet at least a lot of us struggle to pray regularly and passionately. *So many* of us as followers of Jesus—myself included—feel a colossal sense of *failure* when we think about the frequency and vibrancy of our prayer life. So the question is **why do we struggle** *so much*? Why do so many of us have such a hard time putting prayer into practice?

I think a lot of it comes down to **a few hang-ups** many of us have with prayer. So this morning, I want us to work through this passage, but I want to frame it up in terms of three of those hang-ups, and how I think Jesus' *teaching* on prayer helps *respond* to each of them. **I believe with everything in me, that if we can get past these hang-ups and understand prayer the way Jesus describes prayer, it will open things up substantially in our relationship with Jesus.** And so that's what I want to do this morning—I want to use the truth of the Scriptures to speak to these issues, and through that, attempt to turn us all loose in regards to prayer. Sound good?

Okay, here, I think, is one of the **first common hang-ups** with prayer. Phrased as a *question*, it might go something like this:

Prayer Hang-Up #1: Does prayer actually work?

So **before we all just answer "yes"** to this and move on, I want you to think about it just a bit. Because I think the first difficulty I think a lot of us have is the nagging thought in the back of our mind that prayer doesn't actually *accomplish* anything. That it's not *effective*. At least for a lot of people I know, there is this fear that maybe—just *maybe*—when we pray, our words are just evaporating into thin air and not actually accomplishing anything as a result. Have any of you ever *felt* some version of that nagging fear in the back of your minds?

Or maybe for *you*, it shows up as the **slightly more spiritual and theological version** of that same sentiment, which goes something like this: ***isn't God going to do what God is going to do, whether or not I pray?*** When I pray, does God actually do *anything* that he wasn't already going to do anyway? *That's* the question, *that's* the hang-up. And *here*, at least according to Jesus, is the answer:

[7] "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. [8] For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened."

That, to me, **sounds like a yes.** Yes, *prayer does actually work.* It seems like Jesus is saying that the Father *does indeed* respond tangibly and measurably to his people praying. Jesus is saying here is that we should *ask*, we should *seek*, and we should *knock*. *Why?* Because people who *ask*, *receive*. People who *seek*, *find*. And people who *knock*, *have the door opened* to them. In other words, **people who do those things experience tangible results of those things in response.** If you just do your best to take Jesus' words exactly at face value, isn't that what they *seem* to be communicating to us? I don't know how else to read that.

But at the same time, **let's also be honest**: how many of us read those words and felt internally, “yeah that sounds nice, but that’s not how it usually goes.” Like maybe that’s the *optimal* experience with prayer, but most of us don’t get to operate at the optimal level. *Most* of us just seem to pray and then sit back and wonder if it had any impact at all. And because of that experience, many of us struggle to pray with any real *expectation* that something will come of it.

And if that wasn’t bad enough, **certain types of theology** in the Church can **reinforce** this difficulty with prayer. I’ll never forget listening to a sermon from a relatively well-known pastor years ago. And I remember hearing him say in his very preachy voice (which I don’t have), “God wouldn’t be *God* if he changed what he did based on what we ask him to do.” Prayer, to this pastor, was really more about the act of praying itself than it was about results of what we pray. Now I think I’m **tracking with some of that**. Certainly, we shouldn’t think of God as some sort of genie in a bottle who waits on us and grants our every wish whenever we ask for it. *That’s* not who God is. And to be sure, there is plenty that is gained for us by persisting in praying even when we don’t see results—*absolutely*.

But at the same time, does that mean that God *never* responds directly to our prayer? Does that mean we shouldn’t ever pray expectantly, and anticipate results in response to our prayers? Does that mean that prayer is just a sort of non-consequential exercise we participate in?

That understanding certainly doesn’t jive with a lot of the stories of prayer we find in the Scriptures. I think about Moses in Exodus 32, where God has about had it with the Israelites whining to him and accusing him of things he did not do—he’s ready to just leave them to fend for themselves in the wilderness. And he tells that to Moses, but then Moses comes before God and prays. And it says God *relented* from what he was going to do. In other words, God *changed* what he was going to do in response to a prayer.¹

I think about a passage in 2 Kings, where Isaiah, a prophet of the Lord comes and tells a king named Hezekiah that Hezekiah is going to die soon. And it says Hezekiah prayed and petitioned God to heal him, *and God did*. Before Isaiah even left the king’s courts, it says that God told him to turn around and tell Hezekiah that God had heard his prayer and was going to heal him and extend his life by fifteen years.²

I think of that relatively well-known passage in **2 Chronicles**, where God says “if my people pray and humble themselves and seek my face, I will turn from heaven and heal

¹ See Exodus 32:11-14, specifically v. 14.

² 2 Kings 20:1-7.

their land.”³ Now just because that verse has been making the rounds online a good bit lately, I need to clarify: that verse isn’t about America. It’s not a promise made to America—it’s a promise made to ancient *Israel*. But the point still stands that God is saying “if you pray, I will do something in response to that prayer. If you *don’t* pray, I *won’t*.” That simple.

I think of the story in the gospels where the disciples are frustrated because they can’t **cast out a particular demon**—you know, just your normal Tuesday type of problem—and Jesus tells them, and I quote, “this kind can only come out through *prayer*.”⁴ Meaning “if you would have prayed, the demon would’ve come out. Because you *didn’t* pray, the demon *didn’t* come out.” That simple.

I think of the **times in my life** when I have prayed and sought out God about something happening in my life or the lives of other people, and God has *answered* those prayers. Not every time. Not every instance. But *often*. And there are plenty more examples where those come from. We could walk through the Scriptures, Old Testament to New, and I could show you example after example of God answering his people’s prayer powerfully and directly. We could probably go around this room and you and I could list examples of times we’ve seen God answer prayer in our lives and the lives of others. But **here’s my point: God often acts and moves and makes things happen in direct response to his people praying. God does things—evidently, even some things that he wouldn’t have done otherwise—in direct response to his people praying.**

Now **you might say in response** to that, “well isn’t that a *low view* of God and God’s sovereignty?” Nope. It’s a *high view* of God’s *relationship* with his people. God responding to his people doesn’t somehow make him *less* God. It makes him a good, compassionate, relational God. And **just in case you’re still in doubt** about it all, let me show this quote, straight from the mouth of Charles Spurgeon. In case you’re unfamiliar, Spurgeon was a pastor back in the day who had what most everyone considers to be a very *high* view of God’s sovereignty. And here’s what he once said about prayer:

Prayer bends the omnipotence (in other words, the “all-powerful nature”) *of heaven to your desire. Prayer moves the hand that moves the world.*

That’s a **big statement**, is it not? This is the nature of prayer: **God moves when his people pray**. God often does specific and substantial things, simply because his people asked him to do it. Sometimes, things he wouldn’t have done otherwise. And listen—I don’t unpack all of that just because I have a theological bone to pick or something.

³ 2 Chronicles 7:13-14.

⁴ Mark 9:14-29, specifically v. 28-29.

Those of you who know me know that most theological debates make my eyes want to roll back in my head. I bring it up **because I think one of the primary reasons many of us don't pray is because we functionally believe that our prayers don't make any difference.** And *nothing could be further from the biblical teaching about prayer.* Are you following me on that?

Now if you're **more of an analytical person**, maybe all of this gets you thinking, "okay, well what does that mean? Does that mean that if I ended up not praying for something and he didn't end up doing it, that that thing wasn't his will to do anyway?" "Does that mean that if God wants to do something in response to me praying about it, and I'm *not* praying for it, he like *prompts* someone *else* to pray for it in my place instead so that it can still happen? And what happens if I forget to pray for something that I was supposed to pray for—does that throw off the space-time continuum of the universe somehow?" All sorts of questions, right? And I get that.

And I'll be honest—I have **zero answers** to those questions for you. I have no idea. I don't know that the bible *gives* us those answers. But I'll tell you *this*: at some point, getting tied up in all that minutia is actually keeping us from one very simple task: *praying*. Asking God to move in specific, life-changing, world-altering sorts of ways. So do you know what would be a much better use of our time than getting wrapped up in all the technical aspects of God's will and action? To fall on our face, and *beg* our God to move. Because the one who asks, *receives*. The one who seeks, *finds*. And the one who knocks, has the door *open* to him. So *pray*.

Now, let's move on to the **second hang-up** some people have with prayer, and it's certainly related to the first one...

Hang-Up #2: What about *unanswered* prayer?

This, I think is the next problem we have. We **read passages like Matthew 7** and we go "okay, but what about all the times *I've* asked, and *I haven't* received? What about all the times that I've sought God on something, and *I haven't* found it?" We hear things like "God moves when his people pray," and we immediately think of all the times that *hasn't* been our experience at *all*. We think of all the times we've prayed small things or really big things, and they *just haven't panned out*. What do we do with *those* scenarios? What do we do with the times where it doesn't quite play out like Matthew 7 makes it sound like it plays out?

So there actually are **quite a few practical answers** to that question. There's a book called **God on Mute** by a guy named Pete Greig where he gives *fifteen* different reasons

for unanswered prayer. Some of them are straight out of Scripture and others are more philosophical and speculative in nature, but I think they are all really helpful to think on when it comes to this topic. I won't give you all fifteen of them—that would make for a very long teaching. So you'll have to buy the book for that—but I'll **give you a few** just to get you thinking.

Some prayers aren't answered, he says, **because they operate on a faulty understanding of who God is.** To reference what we said earlier, some prayer operates on the assumption that God is our personal genie in a bottle. And that he primarily exists to make our life happy, successful and easy. **For some of us, the only things we regularly ask for is to give us the job that we want, the salary that we want, the relationship that we want.** And while sometimes he does provide those sorts of things, his relationship is so much *more* than all that. So much deeper and more profound than that. And so it may be that by not answering your requests for certain things, the Spirit is trying to draw you into a deeper, more accurate, more beautiful understanding of who God is. And that's a good thing—not a bad thing.

Another reason some prayers aren't answered is **because they contradict other prayers.** To reference one *recent* example from our world, **some** followers of Jesus were praying for Trump to win re-election, many *other* followers of Jesus were praying for Biden to win. By *necessity*, one of those group's prayers *has* to go unanswered, right? Or maybe a bride is praying for beautiful weather on her wedding day, while a farmer a half mile away is praying for rain because his crops are dying. One of those prayers has to go unanswered. That's another reason.

Other reason prayers go unanswered **because we live in a fallen world** that God has not made whole yet. **I think about those who have prayed for a sick friend or relative and then had to watch as that person's health deteriorates. I think of other friends of mine who have prayed to get pregnant with a child and have experienced disappointment, one after another after another.** Sometimes, our prayers go unanswered simply because we live in a fallen world that hasn't been made new yet. Now as followers of *Jesus*, we are sometimes involved in giving and getting *glimpses* of the new creation in the here and now. But that said, we are not living in the new heavens and the new earth *yet*—we live in a world that according to Romans 8, is “subjected to bondage and decay.” Jesus tells us “in this world you *will have trouble.*” That's a *promise*. Not everything is as it should be, which means, unfortunately, not every prayer for God's will to be done will be answered.

So there we have just *three* potential reasons for unanswered prayer. And there are **plenty more reasons** where that came from—again, if you want, feel free to go purchase the book. But I've got to say this: **at the end of the day, I don't actually think that**

what we need *most* is a list of logical explanations for unanswered prayer. I don't think that actually *fixes* anything for us. Let me try to explain why I say that: if I were to sit down with my four year old, **Whit**, and explain to him *all the logical reasons* that I don't always give him every single thing that he wants, my guess is that that list of reasons would not be all that emotionally satisfying to him, right? If I told him every logical *reason* he can't have popsicles for dinner at night, if I gave him all the *reasons* he can't buy every single thing he wants at the store—my guess is that he would respond with “okay—but I still *want* to do those things.” Right?

And similarly, if it were possible for God to sit down with us over coffee and explain to us every logical reason that he doesn't always answer our prayer, my guess is that we'd go “thank you for that...and also I still wish you would answer more.” So I think more than we need a list of logical reasons for unanswered prayer, what we *actually* need is an answer to the last hang-up with prayer. We need an answer to this question:

Hang-Up #3: Can God be *trusted* when he *doesn't* answer?

This, I think, is actually the hang-up behind and **underneath the other two**: when I pray, and when God doesn't answer, can *he be trusted* in his perceived silence? That's the question we're all actually asking, isn't it? Can I trust that when I pray, and when God doesn't answer, that he still cares? **What Whit needs more than a list** of logical reasons that I don't give him everything he wants is this: **he needs an relationship with a father who can be trusted even when that father *doesn't* give him everything he asked for.** He needs an understanding of our relationship with each other that can sustain him through the inevitable disappointments and the confusion and frustrations that will come when that happens. And in the same way, **what you and I need more than a list of reasons for unanswered prayer is a relationship with a Father that can be trusted even when *that Father* doesn't give us exactly what we want.**

And **that is precisely where Jesus lands things** in this passage. Look with me at v. 9-10:

[9] Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? [10] Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent?

Jesus **looks out across the countryside** at the crowd he's speaking to and says “okay—which one of you, if your son asked *you* for *bread* to eat, would give him a stone instead?” “Which of you, if your son asks you for a fish to eat, would give him a snake instead?” And the obvious answer from the crowd was “*nobody*.” No father, no mother would do something like that. **Even the worst of earthly parents know how to give their kid something to eat.** Which sets up Jesus' simple-yet-profound response, v. 11:

[11] *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!*

Every one of us, even the worst of us, know how to give good things to those who ask. And if that's true, how much *more* does our Father in heaven know how to do that for us? How much more can he be *trusted* to do that? And how much more does he *want* to do that for us when we pray?

That right *there is where prayer starts*—with the posture of a Father who always cares for his kids. With an understanding of a Father who can be trusted, even when he doesn't do precisely what we asked him to do. **The relationship with a Father that can endure the ups and downs that a lifestyle of prayer will inevitably produce at times.** When we don't understand why or why *not*, that's precisely when we lean back into the arms of a Father who *does*. And as we develop the ability to do that, we will continue to pray even when we don't see an immediate result. We'll persist in praying even when it seems like some prayers go unanswered. Because we *trust the character of the Father*, we *continue* to ask.

Did you know there was a time when even *Jesus' prayer went unanswered?* As Jesus hung from the cross, in his final hour, he cried out the words of Psalm 22: "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" I want you to imagine being Jesus in that moment. Perfect, constant intimacy with the Father. Perfect, constant relationship with God at all times. And in that moment, as he experienced the most indescribable sort of pain imaginable, his question was "God—*why? Why* is this happening and *why* are you allowing it to happen?" God's response? *Silence*. In the most dire moment of Jesus' life, his prayer went completely unanswered. So listen: if there's anybody that knows how it feels like to cry out from the depths of desperation and feel unheard, it's Jesus.

But *the reason there was no answer* is because Jesus knew *precisely* why. He knew *precisely* why he was being forsaken. **He was being forsaken so that you and I could know we never will be.** He was being *forgotten* so that you and I could be remembered. His prayer went unanswered so that you and I could know that God can be trusted when *ours* go unanswered too. Because it was *precisely because of* that unanswered prayer of Jesus that you and I became sons and daughters of God. It was in that *moment* that God became our *trustworthy Father*. And when you understand that, you begin to learn how to trust, even when you feel unheard too. You will continue to ask, even when you don't get the results you want. Because you have a relationship with the Father that can sustain those experiences.

One reason I *know it works this way* is again, because of my relationship with my son. I have to say no *plenty* of times to Whit. Like *all* the time. When he wants the third straight cup of sugary lemonade over a course of fifteen minutes. When he wants to watch *another* episode of Pokemon (and one episode of that show is enough for a whole week). When I have to tell him I can't come into his room to snuggle with him for the fourth time before he goes to sleep, because he'll never learn to sleep on his own (even though, admittedly, that one is the hardest one to say no to). I say "no" to my son at least as often as I say yes, maybe even more.

But do you know *what that has never kept Whit from doing*? *Asking*. Whit has never thought to himself "you know what—if my dad is going to keep saying no, I'm just going to never ask him for anything ever again. That's the last time I ask my dad for *anything*." He has never had that response. In fact, I'm sort of convinced that sometimes, me saying *no* makes him ask *more* than he did before. And do you know why Whit continues to ask? Because he *trusts the nature of his relationship* with me. He can't *perceive of a universe* in which his dad doesn't *eventually* say yes. He can't *perceive of a universe* in which his dad doesn't *want* to give him good things. So in response, he asks, he seeks, and he knocks.

And *that* is precisely the *posture of a follower of Jesus towards prayer*. When you see God as a good Father, you can't *perceive* of a world in which he doesn't eventually say yes. You can't *perceive of a world* in which he doesn't *desire* to give you good things. Because *that's who he is: a good Father*. And in Jesus, that's who *we are*: sons and daughters of a good Father. Galatians 3, in one of the most brief but most profound statements ever, says "...for *in Christ Jesus* you are all sons (and daughters) of God, *through faith*." Tim Keller puts it this way, and I find it so helpful:

God will either give us what we ask or give us what we would have asked if we knew everything he knows.

That's *the person we're praying* to. The person who will either give us what we ask for, or will give us what we *would* have asked for if we knew everything he knows. If that isn't motivation to start praying and praying regularly, I don't know what is. We ask because we know who we're asking. We seek because we know who we're seeking from. And we knock, because we know who is on the other side of the door, and we know he can be trusted.

So that's *all I have for you today*, content-wise. I intentionally kept this teaching as brief as I could for a couple reasons. One, because I wanted to reiterate just how *simple*

prayer is, and not over-complicate it by saying too many things *about* it. But second, perhaps most importantly, because I want us to *actually* spend some time *praying* together this morning. It seemed silly to me to do a teaching on prayer, and not actually spend some time praying together.

So if you will, go ahead and **put away whatever stuff** you have out. Maybe and especially put your phone away, put it on Do Not Disturb or whatever. And we're just going to respond to this teaching on prayer by *praying*. The band is going to play quietly just to cut out distractions in the room. And as they do, I want you to go ahead and bow your heads. And I'll just give us two things to pray through:

- **Spend time remembering and praying through the character of the Father.** Some of us might have forgotten functionally who the person is that we are praying to. So take a moment right now to remember our Father. To remember that he is gracious and compassionate and responsive—and maybe most of all that he can be *trusted*. Spend some time verbalizing what that means about who he is and how we relate to him. Maybe you just need to sit there for the next few moments and say “God you’re a good Father. God you’re a *good* Father.” However you need to approach it, however you need to do it, do that. Take a second and interact with God as your Father. Go for it...
- And second, **spend time asking God to do something *specific* in your life or the life of someone else.** I want you to zero in on one thing you want God to do. A God-glorifying desire you have. A person you want him to heal. A need of someone else’s you want him to meet. A relationship you want him to restore. A person far from him you want him to rescue out of their sin. And I want you to just pray persistently over the course of the next moment for that one thing. Maybe it’s something that you haven’t even considered praying for because you don’t think God can or will do it. Maybe it’s something you stopped praying for because you’ve lost heart in praying for it. I want you to pick up or pick *back up* that mantle, and petition the doors of heaven with it right now. Let’s do that one...