

SERMON TITLE- "Ask, Seek, Knock"
TEXT- Matthew 7:6-16
PREACHED AT- Neighbourhood Church
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Our family was blessed with a trip to California this Spring Break and, as any trip to an exotic country, you start to see things you don't always notice. For me the first thing I noticed was when I turned on the TV late at night and "Christian" TV was on. I don't watch these channels at home and I'm sure we have the same shows here- but somehow being there I watched for a while.

What I saw bothered me- particularly the selling of a Christianity that was supposed to be a "cure" for all of life's troubles. The message that goes out hour after hour is that God is a kind of a bank that will give you stuff if you just ask for it the right way.

Later on, to help the family deal with a lot of driving I bought an audio CD of "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn." And what did I find? The same version of Christianity showed up there. Here is the HF version in his own words. Listen carefully because I think you will hear some very familiar questions and responses. I think that these put down a good foundation for today's sermon on Jesus' Sermon On The Mount-

The Adventures Of Huckleberry Fin- Chapter 3

WELL, I got a good going-over in the morning from old Miss Watson on account of my clothes; but the widow she didn't scold, but only cleaned off the grease and clay, and looked so sorry that I thought I would behave awhile if I could. Then Miss Watson she took me in the closet and prayed, but nothing come of it. She told me to pray every day, and whatever I asked for I would get it. But it warn't so. I tried it. Once I got a fish-line, but no hooks. It warn't any good to me without hooks. I tried for the hooks three or four times, but somehow I couldn't make it work. By and by, one day, I asked Miss Watson to try for me, but she said I was a fool. She never told me why, and I couldn't make it out no way.

I set down one time back in the woods, and had a long think about it. I says to myself, if a body can get anything they pray for, why don't Deacon Winn get back the money he lost on pork? Why can't the widow get back her silver snuffbox that was stole? Why can't Miss Watson fat up? No, says I to my self, there ain't nothing in it. I went and told the widow about it, and she said the thing a body could get by praying for it was "spiritual gifts." This was too many for me, but she told me what she meant -- I must help other people, and do everything I could for other people, and look out for them all the time, and never think about myself. This was including Miss Watson, as I took it. I went out in the woods and turned it over in my mind a long time, but I couldn't see no advantage about it -- except for the other people; so at last I reckoned I wouldn't worry about it any more, but just let it go. Sometimes the widow would take me one side and talk about Providence in a way to make a body's mouth water; but maybe next day Miss Watson would take hold and knock it all down again. I judged I could see that there was two Providences, and a poor chap would stand considerable show with the widow's Providence, but if Miss Watson's got him there warn't no help for him any more. I thought it all out, and

reckoned I would belong to the widow's if he wanted me, though I couldn't make out how he was a-going to be any better off then than what he was before, seeing I was so ignorant, and so kind of low-down and ornery.

In his blunt and simplistic way HF sets out a way of thinking around prayer and how it is talked about. It has been part of Christianity from the very beginning and being so needs to be explained.

As I was in the middle of writing out this sermon Tasha forwarded me a prayer request that strikes at the heart of this business as well. It is a cry as old as humanity itself.

Hi Tasha

uhm....there's been a terrible accident, and I am asking you to put my family on your church's prayer chain. My ex, my son and daughter's father was the gunman on the front page of the news. My children are going to have a really hard time with this. I need uplifting and I need direction from God. Pls pray for us, I have been praying, and I just feel that the more prayer we get the better it will be.

thanks Tasha

The bottom line in both cases- we need prayer.

And sure enough in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus addresses the matter of prayer and asking for things. That's what we are going look at today.

Before we start however I want to highlight an opening the closing statements that surround Jesus prayer statements-

First is this somber verse-

Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces. Matthew 7:6

This of course is a saying that could stand by itself. It has lots of applications. I have often applied it to the sharing of the Gospel. There are Christians who share their faith in ways that don't seem to work. Some years ago we were in SF and a man was standing on the corner with the classic sign "Repent! The End Is Near" and was shouting out warnings to the crowd that the only solution was to become Christians. It was hard for me to be impressed. I can only imagine what non-Christians must have thought.

But Jesus warning does not stand in a vacuum- it precedes this verse, Jesus' teaching on prayer-

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Matthew 7:7-8

That makes for an interesting set-up and actually reminds me of the HF conversation with Miss Watson. When it comes to a real conversation on prayer things so easily go sideways. There is a world full of intense opinions and the real questions and the important answers are so often trampled underfoot and buried in the mud. The matter of prayer is sacred but it is also delicate. This is not the place to be quick to speak and offer judgments.

But Jesus' teaching on prayer opens with one warning and then closes with 2 others-

First-

Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. Matthew 7:13-14

In this context, I believe the message is that we should listen carefully and attentively to what Jesus is saying here. Prayer is not anything you want it to be. Prayer is God's gift to His people. The end of it is life but it must be entered through the "narrow gate" that Jesus sets out. We are going to look at the "narrow gate" of prayer and petition, today.

Second-

Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Matthew 7:15-16

17Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. 18A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. 19Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. Matthew

21"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

If these verses are meant to be understood as the opening and closing statements around the Kingdom teachings on prayer, then these closing statements are a stern warning that there will be seriously bad teachings on this subject and that those who do so fall under the most intense condemnation summarized by-

... Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!' Matthew 7: 22-23

That is as terrible a judgment as I can imagine. I want to be appropriate in my own judgments and especially after Ryan's great sermon on judgmentalism but when I watched the various "preachers" go around making claims about healing and prosperity that not only seem to contradict the Gospel but also appear to be nothing more than money making scams- taking money from vulnerable people- the condemnation fits as well as it can.

If these brackets are rightly surrounding Jesus' teaching on prayer then what He says about it is both delicate and fragile and open to serious misuse. I don't watch much of this type of Christian TV because in many ways it makes my very uncomfortable. I want to ask these type of TV preachers, "Aren't you a little nervous- given Jesus' warnings here?"

In some ways, of course, it isn't my business what they do with their own conscience- but it is the business of the church to give out Jesus' teachings and His warning in an understandable way.

The bottom line- it is very important to listen to what He says, very carefully.
So let us do that. Jesus says-
Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Matthew 7:7-8

So what is Jesus saying?

#1. We Are Supposed To Ask

First of all, Miss Watson is right. We are supposed to pray. We of course already know that. We know that from our natural instincts which push us to prayer- especially when things go wrong. This is particularly true of those who believe in God specifically but it is also true of those who have vague understandings of God

This is stated baldly in the book of James-
You do not have, because you do not ask God. James 4:2

This is a theme that fills the Bible. God's people are to ask for what is on their heart. In fact HF's request for fishing tackle is him doing the right thing.

When life throws us curve balls and even when we do things that cause those curve balls to be fired in our direction our first response should be prayer.

#2. Requests Should Be Persistent, Progressive And Expectant

This is very clear from these verses. First there is a progression of intensity in the "ask, seek, knock" series. There is a persistence that is being illustrated here. The prayer that Jesus describes here is not just firing off an email request and then letting it be. No, this is prayer that is dogged. This kind of dogged prayer is praised by Jesus in various parables. When Tasha's friend asks for her friends and their churches to pray- she is demonstrating that she understands this persistence.

When there are things in our lives that need attention we need to persist. Persistence is not nagging, it is not rambling on but it carries on. We are on a long journey. Not every day or week, thankfully, is marked by a specific crisis- but our prayers need to recognize the fact.

I have often spoken about my father's example in my life but we are blessed to have a similar example on from Janet's father. When we are there for breakfast occasionally we join him in his daily prayer. And his prayers are long, detailed and systematic- praying for his family, his church and his country. They are not repetitive but they are very thoughtful as he bring his requests to God each day. What a privilege it is to have a living example to watch year in and year out.

This is an example of persistent prayer.

But one thing that needs to be remember is that in the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus taught His disciples to pray, He was very clear that prayer is not about shooting as many attempts into the sky as possible in the hope that some of them might hit the target. That is not what persistent prayer is about.

So what is it? I believe it is like a conversation and conversations are progressive. The conversation moves from one stage to the next. The "ask, seek, knock" series illustrates. It begins by asking. You don't have to know much to ask- you just have to

have a sense that something is missing or not right. “Does anyone out there know what’s going on?”

When that question is finally asked the opportunity for a response is there. There is no opportunity for a response without asking the question.

And even when there is no answer- just asking and getting a blank stare in response means you try again. Even in regular human conversation it often takes several attempts at a question before it connects.

And in this opening statement Jesus tells His followers that they must ask and do so persistently and progressively.

But what also marks this prayer is that it is expectant. This is another difference between a ritualistic, babbling prayer and the one Jesus describes here.

Jesus wants us to pray with the expectation of a response. Those who ask God- receive, those who seek- find, those who knock- will see doors open. When I sit down with a real person and talk out my problems- I expect a response or else I stop talking.

When we really pray, Jesus tells us, we will receive- we will get a response. This is a statement that He makes without equivocation and it is a strong and probably shocking statement. I believe most if not all of us don’t pray with the expectation that is being described here. This is a very radical claim.

The false teachers of course quickly seize on statements like this and will assure you that if you only follow their formula, which usually involves sending them money- you will be able to tape into the radical promise.

But that is not where the answer lies to entering the “narrow gate.” The “narrow gate” is not looking for some tricky way to understand Jesus’ words- it is about listening carefully and trying to understand what He is telling us.

The obvious challenge come from HF’s experience. We make a request. We do so sincerely and at first expectantly- but things don’t turn out the way we want them to. We get fishing line but not hooks. We ask for advice but we are told we are stupid. We try to get a whole team of people praying and still we haven’t broken open the key to getting our stuff.

So Jesus fills out the picture. Prayer is a conversation- but what kind of a conversation is it? It is the conversation of a child with a loving parent.

Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! Matthew 7:9-11

What’s behind this? Obviously HF’s question- “I asked and I didn’t get what I wanted. Why?”

Now HF was an orphan who lived in tragic circumstances. He knew about asking and not getting. HF got nothing in life that he didn’t acquire by his own wits and effort and sometimes by good luck. He knew that wasting your time asking for things from a source that didn’t concern itself about you- was a waste of time.

In many ways, HF is a good illustration of how prayer looks to us- if we don’t understand Jesus.

But I think that even HF could have understood what Jesus says here.

#3. Ask As If To A Loving Parent

A loving parent is not like a debit card that you access merely by swiping and entering the correct password. A good parent responds to requests from a point of view that the child rarely understands- but a child growing up in a truly good home knows that the response is always out of love.

How does that look when you are in the middle of pain and grief and it is unbearable and you just want it to be taken away? I think we have all been in that place.

It is in that context that I believe that it is so important to remember a deep principle of Scripture- God's people are not spared the pain and sadness that are part of life on earth. We get sick as often as anyone else. We face economic tragedy like everyone else. Jesus said it like this at the earlier part of the SOTM- He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. Matthew 5:5

If this is the case then what we get from God is not an easy pass through life.

In some ways this probably challenges most of our understandings of parenting. What would be better than being able to give our children special advantages in life? I think that is every parent's goal at one level.

In reality however our children will not be shielded from life on earth and truly wise parents know what pass on must be far deeper.

Likewise, what God offers us is not a pass on life's challenges. So what does God give us? Like a good home- He gives us the tools and support required to face, survive and even thrive in the face of these challenges. That is an amazing treasure.

And so- in the face of that what does God do for us in response to our prayers and petitions?

He hears us and gifts us good gifts with that goal in mind- to strengthen and bless us and help us thrive in a world that is sometime brutal.

And frankly when we are in this place we also get to see a world that is not JUST brutal and harsh- but also its beauty and joy.

So to answer HF's question- "What's in it for me?" The answer is- "Probably not a fishing line and hooks. Probably not the kind of detours and advantages that reflect out first cries for help. BUT the strength to handle life's bumps and bruises is a pretty amazing treasure. This, HF is worth persisting in."

And by the way, the Widow is also right about our need to help others. Jesus put the famous Golden Rule into His explanation on prayer-

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets. Matthew 7:12

#4. We Are To Pray For Others

The Widow was right on. The treasure of prayer is NOT just for our benefit. God has given His people access to His throne room. This is an ancient concept that everyone in every time understands. If you have access to very powerful people you may be able to get and "in." This is something that people work very hard to get.

Can you imagine having an "in" with the Creator of the universe? Well we do. We can ask for ourselves, as Jesus has explained- but we also have the right to bring

petitions on behalf of those who don't have this access. This is what it means when we are called "priests".

And how does Jesus tell us to use this access? To pray for families, our neighbours, our city, our country and our world.

Huck Finn- you are asking the right questions!