

**The Sermon on the Mount: God's Unlimited Generosity**  
**James 1:5-8 and Matthew 7:7-12**  
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In the entire canon of scripture, I think you would be hard pressed to find a passage that has been more often used and abused than the one we encounter today. Lifted out of context, out of the Sermon Jesus is preaching and made to stand alone without any surrounding framework, you'd get the idea that Jesus has just made God out to be the genie in Aladdin's magic lamp: just a quick rub and poof! Out pops God ready to grant your wish—and Jesus doesn't even limit us to three!

Make no mistake—it is a promise that Jesus is delivering here, an absolute, unequivocal promise. “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.” So, that begs the question, what are we to be seeking? For what are we to ask? And, what is it we hope to find on the other side of the door?

Think for a moment about the progression of Jesus' sermon thus far. Jesus has gone to great lengths to describe life in the Kingdom of God and the kind of person who is part of that kingdom. He began by talking about our character as Kingdom people, then went on to describe our impact on the world around us as salt and light. He called us to righteousness that is greater than that of the best and brightest religious people of our time. He got specific about how righteousness behaves, how it probes our attitudes as well as our actions, and asks us to be pure and perfect in our love for all people, including and perhaps, especially, the people who are hardest for us to love.

Knowing we would need help becoming righteous people who could live in community the way Jesus envisions, he then gave us some spiritual practices to guide us—giving, praying and fasting, with particular focus on how to pray because it is so very difficult, yet so very essential to Kingdom living. Then Jesus addressed our human struggle with idolatry, our tendency to get our priorities and values all out of whack and pursue things that won't last in place of things that will. Throughout the entire sermon, he doggedly invites us to examine our hearts, from the humility it requires to be poor in spirit right through zeroing in on judgment and hypocrisy and how inappropriate and damaging they are to the right relationships that are the hallmark of Kingdom living.

Jesus now returns to the subject of prayer with three verbs that invite us to speak honestly with our heavenly Father. The Greek word translated “asking” regularly refers to prayer in Matthew’s gospel. Seeking God’s face is OT language that means to pray, and the imagery of knocking metaphorically pictures petitionary prayer as standing in front of a closed door, expecting it to be opened.

Already in his sermon Jesus has warned us against pharisaical hypocrisy in which we’re more concerned about what others think as we pray than with what God thinks. He has reminded us of the dangers of rote and formulaic rituals. And, he has provided us with his own model prayer. Now, he actively encourages us to pray by giving us some very gracious promises. As John Calvin put it, “Nothing is [more likely] to excite us to prayer than a full conviction that we shall be heard.”

Prayer is a precious privilege, but it is a privilege we quite often fail to appreciate or utilize, for at least four reasons. First, we are prone to forget how totally depraved we are in and of ourselves. We absolutely do not in any way deserve an audience with the Creator and Ruler of the universe, yet in prayer that is exactly what we receive. We are invited to commune with the Beloved of our souls, to delight ourselves in the Lord, to unburden our hearts before Majesty itself and to find God to be a “very present help in trouble.”

In addition to our forgetfulness, pride also hinders us in prayer. Pride begets in us a spirit of independence and self-sufficiency. It goes against the grain to acknowledge our poverty of spirit and come to God as empty-handed beggars. In our arrogance we prefer to take matters into our own hands, sure that we can figure things out and determine the way that is best for us to go. Prayer is often a last resort, the thing we remember to do only after everything else we’ve tried has failed to work.

Then there’s the problem of laziness which has a paralyzing effect on the life of prayer. The soul, as well as the body, loves its ease, and let’s be honest: prayer is hard work. Paul likens prayer to “striving” (Rom. 15:30), to laboring fervently (Col. 4:12) and to “wrestling” (Eph. 6:12, 18). It is a picture of spiritual, emotional and physical exertion which is why it’s so tempting to avoid prayer altogether.

And, finally, there is the power of doubt. Doubt quenches the spirit of prayer. It raises objections, questioning the efficacy of prayer. It is uncomfortable with the mystery of prayer, and so it remains instead occupied with prayer’s difficulties. There are always so many reasons not to pray. Perhaps that’s why Jesus encourages us with such profound promises.

I don't think there's any such thing as a "bad" prayer as long as it is sincere, but Jesus does seem to think that we can learn to be more skilled at prayer, and the kind of praying Jesus holds up in today's reading has some particular characteristics. In the Greek the verb tense used in this section is the present imperative which means that this verse could be better translated as "ask and keep on asking, seek and keep on seeking, knock and keep on knocking." It suggests a continuous action of petitioning, a life of prayer that is marked by persistence, dogged determination, and expectancy. Such perseverance is for our benefit, not for God's. God is neither ignorant of what we need nor does God require persuading in order to give us what we need. Instead, our persistence in prayer first of all shows us the importance we place on what we're asking for. What we pray about repeatedly is different from what we throw up once and forget about.

Second, persistence in prayer develops patience which is an essential characteristic of a mature spiritual life. It is vitally important that we remember that God's timeline is eternity. God will make things right in God's time. Prayer is an opportunity for us to get in step with God—with God's plan, God's will and God's timing, all of which are often very different from our own.

Third, perseverance in prayer develops faith, and since nothing happens in prayer without faith, this is absolutely critical. Faith is what prepares me to receive the answer that God is making ready to give me. Faith is what allows me to hear God's "no" or "not now" or "not quite like you envision it" with grace. It's what enables me to trust God's answer even when it doesn't seem to jive with my request.

Jesus grounds his promises regarding prayer in the person and character of his heavenly Father. Parental love is one of the most powerful forces at work in the human heart and mind. No parent worthy of the name would refuse to supply the genuine needs of his children when he had the ability to do so. A loving mom or dad does not turn a deaf ear to their children's cries, much less mock them by giving them something useless and noxious rather than what is good and needful.

The relationship between parent and child is built on trust. If that foundation of trust has been solidly laid, a child will not be afraid to come to his parent and tell him what he needs. It's actually quite the opposite. The child is assured that his parent is the one person above all others who has his interests most at heart and is more likely than anyone else to take care of him. The child has confidence in his parent's goodness. He trusts in his parent's love. He doesn't hesitate in the slightest to take every concern, every need to his loving, trustworthy parent.

I want to suggest to you that this is precisely the point on which much of our trouble with faith and prayer lies. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones puts it even more bluntly: “The greatest defect in most Christian lives, I would say, is our failure to know God as our Father. Ah yes, we say we know it and believe it. But do we know it in our daily life and living? Is it something of which we are always conscious? If only we got hold of this [central truth], we could smile in the face of every possibility and eventuality that lies ahead of us.” (p. 462)

When we know, not in our heads, not as a creed or a theological principle, but know in our heart of hearts, that God is a Father who loves us to the depths of our being, then we trust that God’s intentions and purposes toward us are good. Always good. No exceptions. Does that mean that God will remove all pain and difficulties, trials and problems from our lives? No. Much as we think we might like it, that would not be for our ultimate good.

Being good, our heavenly Father gives only good gifts to his children. Being wise as well, God knows which gifts are good and which are not, and this is where faith comes in. Often we think **we** know what the good is in a particular situation, but our knowledge is always limited and our perspective incomplete. God may be working for a higher good or a higher purpose in our lives or in someone else’s that necessitates a “no” or a “not yet” to our prayer. With maturity, time, perspective, and faith sometimes we’re able to see later how good and wise God’s “no” really was.

My route to this church is one of the clearest examples in my life of how good and wise God is, how limited my own perspective is, and how grateful I am that God gives me what I need rather than what I ask for. What seemed to me to be detours and roadblocks and doors that refused to open were in reality God’s very loving and gracious preparation for me to arrive in exactly the right place, at exactly the right time. Had God given me what I asked for, I’d have missed the opportunity at Calvary because I would have already been committed elsewhere.

Even worse, I would have thrust myself upon some unsuspecting congregation before I had learned the lessons those detours and roadblocks needed to teach me. God knew precisely what loving, good gift to give me. I am sorry to have to admit that there were times I wasn’t very appreciative of those gifts. In fact, I railed against God’s apparent stubborn unwillingness to get on board with my agenda. I thank God regularly for saving me from myself as only a truly loving Father would do, and as a result of that experience I’ve learned to trust God in much more profound and patient ways, and I’ve learned to pray differently.

As we come to more fully trust in God's goodness and faithfulness, knowing God to be a parent who loves us and wants only what is best for us, we are then able to take a big step closer to praying with the kind of faith, confidence and power that Jesus describes here in the Sermon on the Mount. We ask, fully trusting that God will answer. We seek, believing that God is already at work with good and holy purposes in mind. And, we knock, with absolute confidence that our Father throws open the door to his heart and love. So, don't give up. Keep at it. Keep praying. God is good and God is able and God is answering your prayers.

Amen.