



about prayer is simple, so why don't we pray?

In most cases I think the bottom line is a combination of spiritual laziness or apathy and our having our priorities out of whack. When I people come to me to talk about their problems, one of the first things I ask is about their prayer life and their time in the Word. And in most cases they don't spend any significant time in either prayer or Scripture. Current surveys indicate that less than 10% of Christians do either. People say they don't have time. Yes, you do, it's just a matter of priorities. Remember that Jesus tells us to lay up treasures in heaven, not on earth. But we're always ready with some other excuse and there are three I typically hear – and I want to talk about those.

First, people get the wrong idea that prayer is somehow unseemly. I've heard people actually say that because God is all-knowing and because he is sovereign over all things, that this sort of advice to ask, seek, and knock is suggesting that God somehow needs to be told what to do or has to be pestered into doing it. One person pointed out that human parents don't wait for their children to ask before meeting their needs.

There is an element of truth behind those objections. It is true that God knows our needs before we ever think to ask. And it's also true that God never makes a "Plan B," as if after hearing our prayers he discovers that we have better ideas than he does. He is sovereign and he works out his purposes regardless of our input. And it's not that he somehow needs to be persuaded to answer our prayers. *The reason has to do with us, not with him. The question isn't whether he's ready to give, but whether we're ready to receive.* In prayer we don't "prevail" on God. No, we prevail on ourselves to *submit* to God. We need to understand those passages that use the language of "prevailing on God" as accommodations to our human weakness. Think back to Genesis and to Jacob. Even when he "prevailed on God," what *really* happened if you pay attention to the story is that God prevailed on him, bringing him to the point of surrender when he was able to receive the blessings God been longing to give him all along.

You see, our heavenly Father never spoils his children. He doesn't shower us with

gifts whether we want them or not or whether we're ready for them or not. No, he waits until we see our need and turn to him in humility. This is why he says, "Ask, and it will be given to you," and this is why St. James tells us, "You do not have, because you do not ask" (James 4:2). There's nothing unseemly about prayer. In fact, prayer is the way God himself has chosen for us to express our conscious need of him and our humble dependence on him.

Second, I've heard other people object to prayer saying that it isn't necessary. That's just plain contrary to Scripture, but people say it anyway. They look at the world around them see from their experience that lots of people – even unbelievers – get along just fine and have their needs met without every praying. It's a theology of experience – which is always a dangerous thing, no matter how pious it might be. But people look at their friends who seem to have everything they need without prayer. They get what they want by working for it, not by praying for it. The farmer's crops grow because he works hard, not because he prays. The cancer patient is cured because he went to the doctor and took the necessary treatments, not because he prayed. The family balances its budget because dad works and earns a paycheck, not because they pray. And so I've heard some people say that this proves prayer isn't necessary – and even that it's a waste of time. It seems more productive to them to spend that time working to meet their own needs than praying.

At this point we need to backup a little, because you see, we have to make a distinction between God's gifts as Creator and his gifts as Father – between what I'll call his "creation-gifts" and his "redemption-gifts." There *are* some gifts that he gives whether we pray or not. God will give a fruitful harvest, a hefty paycheck, or good health to a praying and faithful Christian *and* to an atheist who denies his very existence. He gives life and breath to everyone. He sends rain from heaven and fruitful seasons to all. He makes the sun rise on the evil and the good alike. But you see, none of those gifts is dependent on whether people acknowledge their Creator or pray to him.

But God's "redemption-gifts" are different. God does *not* give salvation to

all alike, but "bestows his riches on all who call on him" (Romans 10:12). And the same goes for the blessings that follow our redemption. Those are the "good things" that Jesus is talking about here in the Sermon on the Mount. He's not talking so much about material blessings, but spiritual blessings – things like daily forgiveness, deliverance from evil, peace, increase of faith, hope and love, and in fact the indwelling work of the Holy Spirit as the fullness of God's blessing.

We can see this if we look at St. Luke's Gospel. Jesus gave this sermon more than once and we know from Luke's account, he changed bits and pieces of it as he preached it to different people. St. Luke gives a parallel passage where Jesus talks about these "good things," but there it's clear that Jesus is talking about these "redemption-gifts" – the spiritual blessings of the Christian life.

In his model prayer, which we looked at before Christmas, Jesus combines both of these kinds of gifts. There we're told to pray for "daily bread" (a creation-gift), but we also ask for "forgiveness" and "deliverance" (both redemption-gifts). I think the answer as to why the two kinds of gifts are combined there is that we pray for our daily bread not because we're afraid we'll starve if we don't (after all, billions of people get their daily bread without ever praying for it), but we ask for it as a way of acknowledging that ultimately it comes from God and because as his children it's appropriate to regularly acknowledge our physical dependence on him. When it comes to forgiveness and deliverance – redemption gifts – we pray because these gifts are given only in answer to prayer, and because without them we would be lost.

The third and final reason I hear people say they don't pray is because they think it's a waste of time. This excuse follows from the last one. They say prayer isn't necessary because God gives to people anyway, even when they don't pray. People will say it's a waste of time to pray, because God didn't give what they asked for. "I prayed that I would pass the test, but I failed." "I prayed that God would heal my mother (or father or husband or wife), but she died anyway." "I prayed to be healed, and my sickness only got worse." "I prayed for peace, but the world is still full of war." "Prayer

doesn't work!" I hear this one all the time.

Here's the thing, though: the promises that Jesus gives here in the Sermon on the Mount are *not* unconditional promises. Just think about that for a minute. Imagine what would happen if Jesus' promise "Ask, and it shall be given to you" were absolute, with no conditions and no strings attached. Think about the consequences if "Knock, and it will be opened to you" were an "Open Sesame" to any and every closed door without any exception. Think about prayer if it were just a magic wand you could wave and have any wish granted. I don't think we stop and think about that often enough. Those are pretty ridiculous ideas about prayer. *But* I know that this is often how we expect prayer to work – or at least how we *want* it to work. But if prayer worked that way, God would be nothing more than Aladdin's genie – all we'd have to do is rub the lamp. We'd be turning God into a divine vending machine!

To the natural man that might sound pretty good, but think about the spiritual implications for us. Think about the strain that would place on a *real* Christian if he knew that everything he asked for, he'd get. If that were truly the case – that whatever we ask God is pledged to give – I'll tell you right now, I'd probably never pray again, because I don't have the confidence in my own limited and tainted wisdom to ask God for anything that he's obligated to give me. Can you imagine the burden that would put on our limited human knowledge and abilities if God was required by his own promise to give whatever we ask, whenever we ask it, and in exactly the terms we ask?

What we need to remember is that our heavenly Father is *good* and he gives only *good gifts* to his children. Our heavenly Father is also *wise*, and so he knows which gifts are good and which aren't. Jesus said that human parents don't give stones or snakes to their children who ask for bread or fish. But what if that child, not knowing better, actually did ask for a stone or a snake for food. What then? Granted there might be some truly irresponsible parent who might actually give him a stone or snake, but most parents are too wise and loving to do that.

When I was about ten I decided to make a snowball melter. I got the idea of cutting the end off of an extension cord so that I could plug one end into an electrical outlet and then stick the bare wires into a snowball. I thought it sounded pretty good, so I ran into the house and asked my mom if she would give me an old extension cord that I could cut the end off of. Needless to say, she was wise and loving enough to tell me "No."

But there are lots of time we fervently pray for something, not knowing that we're asking for a stone, a serpent, or a dangerous extension cord to hack up. God isn't going to give us those "gifts" no matter how much we ask, seek, or knock, because he only gives "good gifts" to his children. When we ask for bad gifts, he denies them. The problem from our end is that those things often look good to us – just like the snowball melter looked pretty good to me as a stupid ten-year-old. We don't have God's perfect wisdom, his knowledge, or his perfect goodness and so we can't know that some things that look good now, may actually be harmful to us or others, even if that harm were to come many years from now. Only God knows the difference between good and bad gifts.

For that reason we can thank God that his granting our requests is conditional – not on our asking, seeking, and knocking, but also on whether or not what we ask for is good. Thank God he answers prayer, but thank God that sometimes he tells us "No." Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote, "I thank God that he is not prepared to do anything that I may chance to ask him...I am profoundly grateful to God that he did not grant me certain things for which I asked, and that he shut certain doors in my face."

This is why Jesus tells to always pray, "Thy will be done." The better we know his Word and the stronger our fellowship with God, the better we will know his will, but that knowledge will never be infallible. I get awfully nervous when I hear people in their prayers making demands of God and *telling* God what he has to or what he *is* going to do for them. It doesn't work that way. Imagine your children coming to you that way and making demands for what they might think is good, but in your greater knowledge, you know is bad. We need to come to God in great humility, ready for

him to teach us, not arrogantly making demands.

Let me conclude by stressing three things. First, that prayer presupposes knowledge. Because God only gives gifts that are in accordance with his divine will, it means that we have to make the effort to discover and know his will. And the way we know God will is by knowing Scripture, by committing it to memory and meditating on Scripture, and by training our minds with Scripture. Second, prayer presupposes faith. It's one thing to know God's will; it's something else entirely to humble ourselves before him and express our confidence that he is able to cause his will to be done. Third, prayer presupposes desire. We may know God's will and believe he will bring it to pass, and yet still not desire it. This is the reason why Jesus' "ask...seek...knock" commands are in this continuing imperative form and why they have this scale of ascending urgency to challenge our perseverance.

And so before we ask, we have to know what to ask for and whether it's in accordance with God's will. We have to believe God can grant it. And we have to genuinely want to receive it. It's only then that we'll see the gracious promise of Jesus come to pass.

Please pray with me: Almighty God, we give you thanks that we can come to you as our loving heavenly Father, confident in the knowledge that you desire to give us good gifts. Grow in each of us a desire to spend time with you each day in prayer. But Father, we ask also that you would remind us that to come with confidence we also need to spend time in your Word, growing in our knowledge of your ways and your will. Give us the humility to submit to your will and to be ready to receive your good answers, even when they aren't what we want to hear – and then let us receive your gifts as the good gifts they are. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.