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After the last couple of sermons I preached from the Sermon on the Mount a BBC member said to me with a smile, *“We can’t worry, we can’t complain, what’s left?”* That’s a fair question. Today’s words of Jesus from Matthew 7 conclude a long string of imperatives that constitute much of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus asks us to let go of anger and retaliation, to go the second mile, turn the other cheek, to love our enemies and to forgive those who have hurt us, to hold our possessions lightly, not to worry and to watch our criticism of others. What’s left? Is that all? Jesus is presenting a way of living which appears beyond our experience. How can we possibly live this way?

Jesus says, *“**Ask**, and it will be **given** you; **search**, and you will **find**; **knock**, and the door will be **opened** for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, **who are evil**, know how to give good gifts to your children, **how much more** will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!”*

At first glance these words can appear to be exceedingly naïve. They seem to promise that we can get anything we pray for as long as we pray with enough persistence and intensity. Some folks end up interpreting this passage as follows: If you haven’t received what you asked for – something is wrong with you. You didn’t pray hard enough or your faith wasn’t strong enough. However, the New Testament makes it clear that prayer is not intended as a means of manipulating God into satisfying our selfish desires. In truth, even *unselfish* prayers for healing may go unanswered.

Many of us have prayed with tremendous effort and emotion for a healing or a change in circumstances that did not take place. The Apostle Paul prayed at least three times that his *“thorn in the flesh,”* apparently some physical affliction would be removed, but the answer he received was simply (2 Corinthians 12:9), *“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”* Naturally we all would prefer that God’s power be made perfect in our strength and good health. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed earnestly (Matthew 26:39), *“My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me, nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.”* We know the cup of suffering did not pass by Jesus and he took and drank all of it. So in today’s scripture, if

Jesus isn't saying we can get anything we pray for if we pray hard enough or long enough, what is he trying to teach us in these words about prayer?

First of all, Jesus is teaching us about the generosity and graciousness of the God to whom we pray. Our conception of God is of the utmost importance to our prayer life because our view of God largely determines how we speak to God. Jesus wants us to understand that when we pray we are coming to a living and loving God who is a very present help in trouble. God is not cold hearted or reluctant to help. Prayer involves the confidence that God takes an individual interest in us. At the heart of prayer is a trusting, growing relationship. Where there is little or no prayer, there will be little or no intimacy or relationship with God.

Anyone who is a teenager or older has probably had the experience of being interested in someone and wanting to get their attention with the hope of developing a relationship. We even talk about "winning someone's love." Some times we may have strong feelings for someone, think about them a lot, but never say anything or do anything because we're afraid our feelings won't be returned or will be rejected. The great thing about prayer is that it is not dependent on human effort to start a relationship with someone who doesn't know we exist or doesn't share our feelings or desire. We don't have to "win" God's love. In prayer we are responding to and acknowledging a relationship of love that God has established with us. God always takes the initiative of love with us. Sometimes people who come to faith later in life wonder why God didn't do more in their life sooner. The truth is God is always the pursuer in love long before we begin to return God's love and affection. Whether we respond to God as children, seniors, or anywhere in between, we are responding to God's love, it just takes some of longer than others to stop playing hard to get. Prayer enables God to be more than an idea or a being who may or may not exist; through asking, seeking, knocking prayer God's presence is felt in our daily life.

Jesus encourages us by reminding his listeners that even healthy human fathers with all our faults, despite being evil, nonetheless deal graciously with our children (most of the time anyway). David Patterson, a convicted burglar, left his prison cell to donate one his kidneys to the daughter he had deserted before she was born. He had written her in the previous months offering one of his kidneys: *"If you forgive me, I will do my best to be the daddy I should have been a long time ago."* His daughter Renada said of her father, *"He must be a good person to do this because other people wouldn't."* When Jesus calls us evil, it doesn't mean we're all doing time in prison, but that all parents, all

children, all people are imperfect and have their weaknesses and sins. Yet if even those whose goodness is mediocre at best are ready to take seriously the requests and needs of their children, HOW MUCH MORE will our heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him.

When we ask, search, and knock persistently in prayer – what will be given, what will be found, what will be opened to us is the grace that enables us to fulfill the demands of the Sermon on the Mount and reveals to us a deeper, richer life than we've ever known.

How then are we to pray? How are we to approach the One who loves us in heaven? When I returned from the mission trip to Biloxi, Mississippi, I was delighted to see Jill, Nathan, and Greg and they were happy to have me home. None of them asked me what I brought them, which was good because I didn't bring anything but myself and suitcase full of dirty laundry. We were just glad we were together again.

Whenever someone returns from a trip a loved one may say, *"What did you bring me?"* Or *"Welcome home, I'm so glad to see you again."*

Which of these illustrates our usual way of approaching God?

"What did you bring me, can you give me this?" Or

"It's great to be with you again; just being with you is the best thing you can give me."

We come to God not so much to *get things*, but to *enjoy* God's presence.

As we come to God to get and give love rather than to get stuff, our prayer life will change from asking for things to asking for God.

People who will ask, search, and knock for God are quite a contrast to Adam and Eve who hid themselves from the presence of God (Genesis 3:8-10). Adam and Eve hid from God, for the same reasons many people do. We try to hide from God because we know we're not who we're meant to be, we're afraid of being exposed for who we truly are. God asks the man, *"Where are you?"* Adam's answer reveals his self-preoccupation, *"I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself."* Adam **hid** from God in the Garden of Eden; Jesus **sought** God in the Garden of Gethsemane. Adam was focused on himself, Jesus was focused on God and he wants us to be the same way. Like Jesus we are to ask, search, and knock not so a warehouse of material goods will be available to us, but so we may be in conversation and communication with God. We pray to receive God's will and guidance for life.

Friday was International Holocaust Remembrance Day, a time to remember the horrors that human beings inflicted on others during World War II. Corrie Ten Boom, a holocaust survivor and the author of *The Hiding Place*, would pose this question about prayer to Christians, *“Is prayer your spare tire or your steering wheel?”* How are we to pray?

We pray believing our prayers make a difference. B.J. Willhite noted, *“Unless a person believes that his or her prayers really make a difference he or she is not likely to pray consistently.”*¹ We pray and ask and seek and knock believing that God cares for us, for all people, and for all creation. The wrong way to ask is described in James 4:3, *“You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your passions.”* I don’t mean to hurt anyone’s feelings, but I do not encourage people to pray to win the lottery. Often we see athletes praying or making the sign of the cross while playing a game, which is part of their routine or preparation, but what if the person they’re competing against is just as faithful? A man was watching a college basketball game with a friend who was a Catholic priest. A player about to shoot a free throw crossed himself first. *“Does that really help?”* the man asked his friend the priest. *“Only if you’re a good free throw shooter,”* the priest replied.

An example of the right way to ask is given in 1 Kings 3:5-14. God said to young King Solomon in a dream, **“Ask what I should give you.”** Solomon replies, *“Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for, who can govern this your great people?”* *It pleased the Lord that Solomon asked this. God said to him, “Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you. I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you. If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life.”* Prayer is an act of ours that enables God to act on our behalf.

We search for God knowing that God desires to be found. Most people have played hide and seek, perhaps it’s been a little while for some of us. The idea is not to be found, but not really. If you sit hiding and hear others laughing and running and no one finds you, you begin to feel left out. So you know what you do. You stick out a foot

¹ B.J. Willhite, *How To Get Your People to Pray*.

or an arm and then someone sees you and you say, "Shucks, you found me." God is not hiding, God wants to be found; the question is how much are we seeking? I saw a cartoon this week of a pastor sitting at his desk. The "to do" pile was three feet high and the out pile was virtually empty. Scattered on the corner of the desk were messages. *"God called to talk. God called back. God called to say he misses your time together."*

The Lord promises us in Jeremiah 29:12-14, *"Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me."* We seek for God knowing that God desires to be found so we do quit or give up too easily or too soon.

We knock knowing that we are not in the position of having to plead with God as we may even have to do with a parent. Jesus doesn't describe the case of a person asking for something bad or wrong. He doesn't say, *"What parent among you if your son asked for a scorpion will say, 'Okay.'"* A good parent doesn't give a child something they believe to be harmful just because the kid asked for it. We don't eat Mike and Ikes and ice cream for breakfast. One woman (Jean Ingelow) wrote, *"I have lived to thank God that all my prayers have not been answered."*

God may not give us all the good things we happen to ask for, but God is always ready to give us the best gift, the gift of God's Spirit. We are encouraged to ask for the gift of the Holy Spirit. A mother or father can give children the things they need even if the kids never ask or don't know what they truly need. However, there is a level of love, intimacy, and relationship that cannot be achieved unless both parties are willing and ready to both give and receive.

In Revelation 3:14-20, Jesus models both this level of love and the kind of prayer he's talking about in Matthew 7. *"Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me."*

While we often hear this verse used in reference to an individual who needs to ask Christ into his or her life, in Revelation 3 Jesus is actually standing outside knocking on the door of the lukewarm, passionless church in Laodicea trying to get in. Jesus is knocking on the door of the church hoping the church will let him be in their midst as he was once.

Even Jesus knows what's like to knock and not know what the outcome will be. He knows what it's like to make a request in prayer that is not granted. The cup of crucifixion was not removed from him.

Almost ten years ago Greg was born at Cape Cod Hospital. One of the things I kept from that experience was the hospital bracelet that identified me as the husband of Jill and the father of baby 13156. Wearing that bracelet meant I had access to both Jill and the baby any time of day or night, whenever I wanted. Now you would be shocked if I told you that I never used that freedom and opportunity to see my wife and son. You would probably question how much I loved them if I didn't care to be with them. Because of how I feel about Jill and Greg I used that access repeatedly and for long periods of time.

It meant a lot to Jill that I was with her while she was in the hospital.

Now put yourself in God's place. God has given every follower of Jesus a bracelet that identifies us with Christ as children of God. We can have access to God anytime of day or night whenever we please. Would you be shocked to learn that we leave God languishing alone for prolonged periods of time with no visit from us? Because of the love we feel for God, we are wise to use the opportunity and access we have been given, to spend intimate time with God. God will appreciate seeing you and hearing from you. Your relationship will deepen, the love between you will grow, and you will increasingly receive what you need to resemble more and more your brother Jesus and your Father in heaven.

So ask, search, and knock, and be persistent in prayer. God looks forward to hearing from us.

What are some practical tips for listening to God?

Listening to God is an important part of the Christian life. God desires to speak to us and we have the privilege of listening to His instruction and guidance.

William Barclay once said, *"Prayer is not a way of making use of God; prayer is a way of offering ourselves to God in order that He should be able to make use of us. It may be that one of our great faults in prayer is that we talk too much and listen too little. When prayer is at its highest, we wait in silence for God's voice to us."*

So, how can we discipline ourselves to hear the voice of God? Consider these practical tips:

- Plan ahead. Restructure your schedule so you can spend uninterrupted time with your Heavenly Father. Find a quiet place and bring along your Bible, notebook, and pen. Perhaps you enjoy worshipping with music and would like to bring along your favorite worship music.

- Prepare yourself mentally, emotionally, and physically. It is essential that we come to God with a pure heart, righteous motives, and a desire to hear from Him. Spend time confessing sin and receiving God's forgiveness.
- Spend time in prayer, worship, Bible reading, and meditation on God's Word. As you read God's Word, ask Him to speak to you. God often speaks to His children through His written Word.
- Wait expectantly. This is not a time to zone out or think of the activities for later in the day. If something apart from God's voice comes to your mind, jot it down. This will free your mind to be able to concentrate on God and listen for His instruction.
- Spend time in silence, waiting for God to speak in your spirit. Feel free to ask Him questions and then await His answer. Some people like to write down what they hear from God or any direction they receive about a certain issue.
- Obey whatever God tells you to do.
- Continue your time of waiting on God throughout the day. Always be listening for His voice. John 10:27 says, *"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me."*