

DID JESUS REALLY MAKE THAT PROMISE?

MATTHEW 7:7-11

If you're in your 50s like me or above, you probably remember where you were when you first heard that President Kennedy had been assassinated. I remember that day very clearly. I was in the second grade at Crystal Lake Elementary School in Lakeland, Florida. Those much younger than me have had a similar experience. For instance, I'm quite sure you still remember where you were and what you were doing when you first heard about the events on September 11, 2001. You'll never forget that moment; I guarantee it. David Lodge, a British novelist, tells where he was when he first got the news about President Kennedy. He was in a theater watching the performance of a play he'd helped write. In one scene of this play, a character was demonstrating his nonchalant, "I could care less" attitude towards life by holding a transistor radio to his ear while being interviewed for a job. The radio was just a prop. But the actor playing the part always tuned into a real broadcast during the play itself. Suddenly – right during the play – came the announcement that Kennedy had been shot. The actor immediately switched off the radio, but it was too late. Reality had interrupted make believe. That can happen when you pray! Have you ever been shocked that God actually answered your prayers? Often, we don't really expect anything very significant to happen when we pray. Then, suddenly, God's reality breaks in and we're shocked by it.

"Hard Questions About Prayer" is the title of the message series this month. Why speak to you about prayer? One, you and I need to get better at it. It's too central and important to being a Jesus' follower to overlook or minimize. Two, prayer is fundamental to the spiritual success of any local church. If our church is going to realize the good and great things God has for us in the future, more frequent prayer, more fervent prayer and more faithful prayer is absolutely necessary. We need to ask God to bring us as a church into a new, Holy Spirit-inspired experience in prayer. It's how God does what He wants to do.

This morning, let's consider something Jesus said about prayer. Did Jesus *really* make that promise? Isn't that just too good to be true? I've prayed and asked for God to do things and He didn't grant my request. Why not? It's easy to read into the Bible what is not there. It's harder to dig in and discover what is there. These words are about prayer and prayer is arguably the most important part of relationship with God. Let's think about this first of all:

WHAT JESUS DOESN'T PROMISE ABOUT PRAYER

Let's not beat around the bush. First, Jesus doesn't promise here that God is required to answer every prayer request ever made. Jesus never taught that God is some kind of heavenly vending machine set in motion by a quarter called "prayer" and then dropped into the appropriate slot. There are at least two reasons why some prayers aren't answered. First, consistently answered prayer is contingent upon an authentic, obedient relationship with God.

Jesus' words about prayer here are a part of a larger section in the Gospel of Matthew – chapters 5-7 - called the Sermon on the Mount. His major theme throughout that whole sermon is something Jesus referred to as the Kingdom of God. We spent about 10 Sundays earlier this year considering what Jesus reveals about this Kingdom of God in the stories or parables He told. You might recall that the Kingdom of God is the most fundamental reality in all the universe. It's God's rule and reign over all things. It's bigger than the universe and yet it can somehow fit into the human heart and mind. You enter into the Kingdom of God the moment you put your trust in Jesus for eternal life and receive His forgiveness for your sins. You live in this Kingdom by bringing your daily actions, attitudes, behavior and lifestyle into conformity with God's will. Jesus' words about prayer here presuppose that these promises are only valid for people who've entered into this Kingdom and who are living in it. In other words, this is not a promise offered to anyone and everyone at any time regardless of your relationship to God.

The Kingdom of God is a spiritual environment. Flowers have an environment that includes soil, air and sunshine. Fish have an environment; it's called water. If a flower wants to live on concrete or a fish wants to live in a tree, there's no way they can have their needs met. As a result, they die. That's not the environment God created them to live in. The Kingdom of God is the environment God created you to live in forever. But you don't start out your life living in that environment. The Bible says you start out life with a broken relationship with God. As a result, God can't meet your deepest and greatest needs because you're in the wrong environment – like a flower yearning for concrete or a fish trying to climb a tree.

This promise to answer prayer is for folk already in the Kingdom of God who recognize Jesus' Lordship over their lives every hour of every day, every day of every week and every week of every year. Jesus' promise is most certainly *not* for people who think God is just up there to answer their random prayers or that His purpose is to do nice things for them. Isn't it amazing how often people who are content to ignore God day after day or who have no desire to know Him personally, nevertheless, expect Him to answer their prayers? Now, because God is merciful, compassionate and gracious beyond our understanding, He will often answer the prayers of those who are content to ignore Him most of the time. That's sometimes referred to as "common grace." God blesses people all the time who don't deserve it. Jesus makes that same point earlier in this sermon, "This is what God does. He gives his best—the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty." (Matthew 5:45 MSG). But the promise to answer prayer here is something different. It presupposes that you have a Kingdom relationship with God.

Here's a thought. Don't ask God to answer your prayers while you're living in a way that you know full well doesn't honor Him. Don't claim this promise for your prayers while at the same time you thumb your nose at God. Yes, God might

answer your prayer even if you're living like the devil, but don't count on it. Consistently answered prayer is contingent on an authentic, obedient relationship with God. Someone might say, "Rick, if I have to be perfect before I get a prayer answered, I might as well not pray at all." This isn't about being perfect. The Bible is careful to distinguish between a random act of sin and an entrenched pattern of habitual sin. For example, let's say you lose your patience with your kid and just blow him out of the water with an angry statement. Is that a sin? Of course it is and the Holy Spirit will convict you of it. Hopefully, you'll confess that sin to God and ask your kid's forgiveness as well as the Lord's. That's a random act of sin. But let's say you have those angry outbursts almost daily. That's a habitual pattern of sin. That's got to get fixed. Until and unless that's surrendered to God, your prayer life will suffer. Why? Because consistently answered prayer is contingent on an authentic, obedient relationship with God.

Here's a second reason why some of your prayers don't get answered. God can only ever do what's good for you. Sometimes what you ask for isn't what's good for you long term. It would be a tragedy if God gave you everything you wanted or thought you needed. Some of our prayer requests are silly, selfish and short-sighted. They're always limited because God alone knows everything including the future. Sometimes what you pray for may seem right and good at the time you ask for it, but God knows it's not what you need to have at the time. He's too good and too strong to compromise even when you continue to plead or whine with Him to give you what you want.

Let me touch on another matter. Jesus doesn't promise here that God will answer every prayer request even when it's offered in faith. No doubt you're aware of a certain kind of teaching – very popular on TV, by the way – that suggests God is virtually required to answer a prayer request when you offer it in great faith. People are taught the importance of "making a positive confession" or some other such language. I don't question the sincerity of these fellow Christians or the reality of their faith, but the fact is they're just dead wrong about God and prayer at this point. Why so? Their concept of faith becomes a denial of reality. For instance, if someone has a deadly disease, he or she is encouraged to ask God to remove the disease. Well and good! Perfectly appropriate prayer! But, then, sometimes an afflicted person is encouraged to act as if he or she is not sick at all or that the illness has disappeared when it hasn't. Or is someone is having a great struggle in some area of his or her life, acting in "faith" is presented as not even admitting there's a problem at all.

Biblical faith never denies reality or tries to escape it. No, biblical faith is the ability to look reality in the face – no matter how scary – and trust in God's power to do what's best. When David faced the giant Goliath, he didn't say, "Goliath, people say you're nine feet tall, but by faith I say you're only 5'2"!" No, instead, David said to Goliath, "You come to me with sword, spear, and javelin, but I come to you in the name of the LORD of Heaven's Armies—the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. Today the LORD will conquer you, and I will kill

you and cut off your head. And... the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel!” (1 Samuel 17:45-46 NLT) When Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were about to be thrown into a furnace by King Nebuchadnezzar for not worshipping his golden image, they didn’t say, “People say that fire’s really unbelievably hot, but by faith I say it’s just toasty in there!” No, instead, they said to the king, “If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God whom we serve is able to save us. He will rescue us from your power, Your Majesty. But even if he doesn’t, we want to make it clear to you, Your Majesty, that we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you have set up.” (Daniel 3:17-18 NLT) Biblical faith doesn’t deny reality; it faces it in the power of God come what may.

Here’s something else we find hard to accept. God has a good and eternal purpose even in suffering. The fact is that wonderful, godly, inspiring followers of Jesus die of illness despite faithful and fervent prayers. The fact is that mature Christians face horrendous, sometimes tragic struggles in life and God doesn’t always deliver them quickly even though much prayer is offered up to Him. God’s eternal purpose may not be revealed this side of heaven. Yes, by all means, pray for healing, pray for deliverance and pray that obstacles are removed. By the same token, don’t look at this verse and get all cynical about it feeling as if God has somehow failed you. Or, don’t get all beaten down and discouraged thinking your faith is weak and ineffective because you’re not healed from some illness or delivered out of some struggle. Jesus isn’t promising here that great faith always gets the answer you want. Well, enough about what Jesus doesn’t promise here about prayer. Let’s talk about:

WHAT JESUS DOES PROMISE ABOUT PRAYER

First, Jesus promises that God is a loving Father who can only give you what is best. That’s Jesus’ point here. If normal, human dads who are sinful and selfish by nature know how to provide good stuff for their kids, can you really believe that your heavenly Father who is perfect, holy and the essence of grace will be less loving to you? Isn’t His love over, above and beyond any expression of love that an earthly mom or dad could provide?

What a wonderful promise! God is a Father who has a tenacious love for His children that never quits. He’s always interested in you, always concerned about every detail in your life and always watching over you. His attitude towards you is one of grace and blessing. Knowing this truth about God – your heavenly Father – ought to bring a sense of comfort to your heart as well as assurance and joy to your prayers. When you pray, you rest in the fact that God will only give you what is best. I didn’t say God will give you what you think is best, or easy, or pleasant or convenient. God will allow difficulties and heartaches and He asks you to trust Him as to the reasons why. You can expect His grace and strength in the midst of those hard times and the knowledge that something of eternal substance and value is being deposited in your soul. Human dads make mistakes with their kids even when they’re trying to do the right thing, but God

your Father never makes mistakes. Jesus says that your heavenly Father can only give you good gifts. Because He is wise and all knowing, He alone knows gifts are truly good for you in the end.

At different times in my life, God has taken a portion of the His Word and used it to speak His truth into my heart in a very direct and personal way. God used these verses in my life in a special way about thirteen years ago. I was single at the time. My first marriage had ended in divorce a few years earlier and the healing from that tragedy had been slow. Then this wonderful, beautiful woman by the name of Cheryl walked into my life. She seemed too good to be true! I went to God in prayer and said, "Lord, I can't handle any more marital pain and heartache. If this relationship isn't meant to be, shut it down and make it go away." God led me to these verses we're looking at today. "So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him?" (Matthew 7:11 NLT) What I heard Him say to my heart was this: "Rick, I'm your heavenly Father. You've been praying for a partner in life. There she is! I'm not going to trick you. I'm not going to fool you. I only know how to give good gifts." He certainly does!

What else does Jesus promise here? Jesus promises that God responds to persistent prayer. In the ancient Greek language that the New Testament was originally written in there are two kinds of verbal commands. The first kind tells you to do something once, like, "Stop at the red light just ahead." The second kind of verbal command tells you to keep on doing that one thing again and again and again, like, "Keep stopping at every right light you come to." It's that second of verbal command that's used there in v. 7-8. As such, this rendering of those verses is grammatically correct, "Keep on asking and it will be given. Keep on seeing and you will find. Keep on knocking and it will be opened to you. For everyone who keeps on asking will keep on receiving. Everyone who keeps on seeking will keep on finding. Everyone who keeps on knocking will keep on having the door opened." (Matthew 7:7-8) God values persistency in prayer.

Why? Why does God want you to ask Him for something more than once? Does He like to be nagged? Does He have a bad memory? No, the value of persistent prayer is for your sake not God's. First of all, persistent prayer allows for the best answer to prayer. The best answer to your prayer isn't always the first or the immediate answer. Some prayers need time to get answered. It takes time to grow a flower or a tree. Likewise, it takes time to soften the hard heart of someone you're praying for. While you keep on praying, God keeps on working. Secondly, persistent prayer keeps on reminding you of your need for God. Every time you pray, you remind yourself that you're not big enough to handle life's problems on your own. Praying persistently keeps you constantly in touch with the greatest Person in the universe who also has the greatest power at His disposal at all times.

There's a third reason why persistence in prayer is a good thing. It allows you to test the legitimacy and real urgency of what you're requesting. It allows you time to figure out the answer to this important question, "What is it that I'm really asking God to do here?" Have you ever prayed for something and then sometime later – a week, a month, a year – you realize it's just no longer an issue or it's no longer very important to you? Or perhaps the request itself changes the more you pray about the issue. When you're persistent in prayer you invite the Holy Spirit to change and shape those prayers so that they're in line with God's will and ways. God values persistency in prayer.

A dad and his six year old son went fishing. They put out the lines and then went up to the cabin. After an hour they returned to the river to see if they'd caught anything. Sure enough, several fish were on the lines. "I knew there would be, Daddy," said the boy. "How did you know?" his father asked. "Because I prayed about it." So they baited the hooks once again, put out the lines, and went to the cabin for supper. Afterwards, they went back again to the river and found fish yet again on the lines. "I knew it," said the boy. "How?" asked his father. "I prayed again." A third time, they put out the line into the river and went to the cabin. Before bedtime, they returned to the river, but no fish were on the lines this time. "I knew there wouldn't be," said the boy. "Now, how did you know that?" Dad asked. "Because I didn't pray this time." "And why didn't you pray, son?" "Because," said the boy, "I remembered that we forgot to bait the hooks."

Maybe praying is a bit like fishing. How can that be? No fisherman expects a fish just to jump out of the water into the boat. And you can't expect to catch a fish without bait. Even a six year old knows that! Here's the analogy. Do you want to get your prayers answered? Well, then, you need to bait the hook. I say that with the utmost reverence. I'm not comparing God to a fish. But prayer is the expression of a relationship and every true relationship is a two way transaction. Frankly, you get more prayers answered when your relationship with God is consistent, authentic and obedient. You get more prayers answered when you remember that God can only do what is good for you ultimately. Or, to put it another way, God can only give you what is best. You get more prayers answered when you're persistent in your prayers. When it comes to prayers and getting them answered, God will do everything He needs to do and more. The question is are you doing everything you should do. Are you baiting the hook?