

The Commands of Christ

Sermon #14

“Ask ... Seek ... And Knock”

Matt 7:7-11

There is nothing that reveals more about a believer than his or her prayer life. How that individual approaches God and what that individual is willing to ask for reveals how he or she views God. We frame our requests in accordance with what we know of the character of the one we are addressing. It is very similar to how a child will make a request from their father. The child with a kind, gentle and firm father, does not fear to ask anything, for deep down they have the assurance that the father has greater wisdom and experience, and therefore would not give them anything that would be harmful to them. The child with an extravagant but uncaring father will with arrogance lay down his demand knowing his every desire will be met. The child with the stingy, ill-tempered, abusive father will seldom dare to ask for anything, fearing yet another emotional explosion.

This is also true spiritually. When we pray we pray in harmony with the view of God we have. I think sometimes our view of God can be influenced by the kind of earthly father we have had. An individual that believes God is arbitrary, will be fearful and on guard. The individual who believes that God is vengeful will be fearful. But the individual who believes that God is gracious will come boldly.

“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. (8) For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. (9) Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? (10) Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? (11) If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!”

All three verbs in verse seven, *Ask, Seek, Knock* are imperatives (commands). There are two basic kinds of imperatives in the New Testament. There is the aorist imperative which is a command to do a particular thing at one specific time, and there is the present imperative which is a command not only to do something but to keep on doing it indefinitely. All three verbs in verse seven, *Ask, Seek, Knock* are not only imperatives (commands) but they are present tense imperatives. We are told to ask and keep on asking, we are to seek and keep on seeking and we are to knock and keep on knocking.

There is also within this verse a suggested progression in prayer. The very words; ask, seek and knock seem to suggest an ever increasing intensity in prayer.

1. Asking. There are some things that are the need is so clear that we mere must ask for them.
2. Seeking. Seeking is a deeper level of prayer than just asking. Sometimes we may doubt or be in darkness and we need to first seek God's will before we know what to pray for. But God has made provision for us even in such times for we read in Romans 8:26-27 we read, "*... the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. (27) Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God.*"
3. Knocking. The knocking here denotes seeking entrance, or desiring fellowship.

Within this command to pray I think we can see five general principles about prayer.

1. God Does Not Promise to Answer Everyone's Prayers.

There is a restriction to the promises given in these verses. The promises apply only to those who are really God's children.

Some would say, "*But isn't God the Father of all humans?*" And the answer is, "*No he is not!*" And he is not obligated to answer the prayers of those who are not his children. I realize of course that is pretty narrow statement, in fact a former head of the Southern Baptist Convention once stirred up a big conflict over his statement that God is not obligated to answer the prayers of unbelievers. But he was right! God is not the Father of all men, God is the Creator of all men, but that is not the same. God is Father only to those who are born again into the family of God.

God Does Not Promise to Answer Everyone's Prayers....

2. We Are Expected To Ask for the Things God Has Promised. "*ask and it shall be given.*"

This same principle is stated in the negative in James 4:2 "*... you do not have because you do not ask.*" Don't those words describe the church as you know it today? The venerable evangelist preacher of the early nineteenth hundreds Dr. R.A. Torrey said, "*We do not live in a praying age. We live in an age of hustle and bustle, of man's efforts and man's determination, of man's confidence in himself and his own power to achieve things, an age of human organization, and human machinery, and human push, and human scheming, and human achievement; which in the things of God means no real achievement at all.*"

[Reuben A. Torrey. "The Power of Prayer" (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1955) p. 16 as quoted by James Montgomery Boice. The Sermon on the Mount: An Exposition. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972) p. 274]

We Are Expected To Ask for the Things God Has Promised

3. God hears and answers every prayer. (v. 8)

“For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.”

There are two certainties when we pray. One is that God hears every prayer.

The other certainty is that God always answers. This verse says for *‘everyone who asks receives,’* did I read that right? Yes, it says everyone receives! But we have the misconception that the only possible answer to prayer is yes. There are two other possibilities. God can say, No or he can say, Not Yet.

God hears and answers every prayer...

4. Sometimes God Gives Us What We Need and Not What We Ask for. (vv. 9-11)

“Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? (10) Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? (11) If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!”

Even earthly fathers give good things to their children. We do not give a child a red-hot chili pepper just because they ask for it. Well, my father might have but he an unusual sense of humor. May you can now understand what is wrong with me. He once had me hold on to the spark plug of the lawn mower so “I could see if it was firing.” It was firing alright, it knocked the fire right out of me. But general speaking we do not give things to our children that we know will really harm them. And if this true of our earthly fathers how much more true it must be of our heavenly father.

John Stott puts it this way, *“So then if we ask for good things, he grants them; if we ask for thins which are not good (either not good in themselves, or not good for us or for others, directly or indirectly, immediately or ultimately) he denies them; and only he knows the difference.”* [John Stott. *Essential Living: The Sermon on the Mount.* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988) p. 189]

Someone has written *“I asked for strength that I might achieve; he made me weak that I might obey. I asked for health that I might do great things: he gave grace that I might do better things. I asked for riches that I might be happy; he did not give them so that I might be wise. I asked for power that I might have the praise of men; I was given weakness that I might feel a need of God. I asked for all things that I might enjoy life; I was given life, that I might enjoy all things. I received very few of the things I asked for; but I received the things I had hoped for.”*

[Haddon w. Robinson. The Solid Rock Construction Company. (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1989) pp. 106-107]

Sometimes God Gives Us What We Need and Not What We Ask for...

5. No Prayer Is Ever Wasted.

The underlying principle behind the significance of persistent prayer has to be the truth that no prayer is ever wasted effort.

I want to close with an illustration from the life of Howard Hendricks, beloved professor at Dallas Theological Seminary. Dr Hendricks writes, "The phone rang and I greeted a young pastor friend from Arlington, Virginia. "What are you doing?" he asked. "Studying," I replied. "Nothing special." "Are you sitting down?" "Yes, why?" "Your father just trusted Christ this evening." "He what? You've got to be kidding!" I blurted out. Such an inappropriate response grew out of long detours in our father-son journey. Ever since I received Christ as a boy my concern has been for the salvation of my family and loved ones. On repeated occasions I had broached the subject of the gospel with dad, but his response was less than excited.

My father has always been a very important person to me. Not that I approved of everything he said or did or that I imitated him consciously in any way. We weren't really close friends, either. But he was important in my life because of the indirect impact he made upon me.

Dad was a military man. He had seen action around the world. During the periods when he was embroiled in battle, I would become very sensitive to his spiritual need. I and my family prayed for him, but at times I'm afraid my faith sputtered. His response was always the same: Son, don't worry about me. I'll work it out with God (as if God could be manipulated like a Pentagon official).

God brought a man into my life, a man with a passion for men. His name was Butch Hardman. One day before we knew each other Butch was boarding a plane in Detroit when a friend handed him a cassette tape. "Ever hear Hendricks? Here's a tape you should listen to." On that tape I related my father's spiritual need. Butch listened and something about the anecdote reminded him of his own father with whom he had shared Christ shortly before he died. He began to pray for this unknown man, George Hendricks.

Some months later Butch attended a pastors' conference in Philadelphia where I was the speaker. He shook my hand afterward. That was the only time our paths crossed before a remarkable incident in Arlington.

Butch was driving the church bus down the street, having discharged all his passengers. He saw a man standing on the corner who reminded him uncannily of Howard Hendricks. Could it possibly be...? He backed up the bus, stopped, got off, and went over to the man. "Are you by

any chance Howard Hendricks' father?" It is easy to imagine the startled response. "Er-ah (I can envision my father's critical once-over with his steely blue eyes) yeah—you a student of my son?"

"No, I'm not, but he sure has helped me. Got time for a cup of coffee?"

That encounter began a friendship, skillfully engineered by the Spirit of God. Butch undoubtedly sensed dad's hesitancy when he discovered he had met a preacher. For a long time Butch did not invite him to attend his church. He simply suggested that dad drop by the office for coffee. Patiently he endured dad's cigars and his endless repertoire of war stories. Before long he also learned that dad had been diagnosed as having a terminal throat cancer.

Months later Butch was at his bedside. "Mr. Hendricks, I'll be leaving shortly for a Holy Land trip. Instead of my listening to you tonight, would you let me tell you a story?"

Butch had earned his hearing and he began simply to relate the interview of Jesus Christ with Nicodemus as recorded by the Apostle John. At the conclusion dad accepted Butch's invitation to receive Jesus Christ as his own personal Savior. Then dad got up out of bed, stood, and saluted with a smile. "Now I'm under a new Commander-in-Chief!" That night Butch called Dallas.

The last time I saw dad alive I could not believe he was the same man I had known. His frame was wasted, but his spirit was more virile than I had ever known.

In accordance with dad's specific provision in his will, Butch Hardman conducted the crisp military funeral in Arlington cemetery where the gospel of Jesus Christ was presented to the small group of family and military attendants. As the guns saluted their final farewell, I knew God had vindicated forty-two years of prayer.

[Howard & Jeanne Hendricks. FootPrints. (Multnomah Press, 1981) pp. 16-19 - www.bible.org/illus/p-q/p-q-83.htm

No Prayer Is Ever Wasted ...

What are the principles of Prayer revealed in this command?

1. God Does Not Promise to Answer Everyone's Prayers.
2. We Are Expected To Ask for the Things God Has Promised
3. God hears and answers every prayer.
4. Sometimes God Gives Us What We Need and Not What We Ask for.
5. No Prayer Is Ever Wasted

