

Grace to Live – Ask, Seek, Knock

Matthew 7:7-11 | Sunday, November 11, 2018 | By Brian Brookins

GRACE TO LIVE

ASK, SEEK, KNOCK

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We continue our study through the Sermon on the Mount. We are nearing the end, and Jesus in this passage teaches us on the topic of prayer.

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are 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!

Jesus is teaching us about prayer. This is the second time in the Sermon on the Mount where he deals with this subject. He has already taught us some on prayer and we immediately see, both on that occasion and in these verses that we are surprised at what Jesus has to say on the topic of prayer. In the first place he told us that prayer is not about your many words and it's not about impressing others. It's not about others hearing you.

One of the things that I hear over and over again from people is, "You know, I have trouble praying with my spouse or praying with friends, or praying over a meal, or praying publicly." Jesus' words really release us to say, "No, no, no. It's not about what they think. You just be yourself and talk to your Father. In fact, if your focus is on him, your prayer will be more powerful. The moment we get into, "Okay, I've got to make this sound right because everyone else has to be impressed," we are moving away from kingdom prayer.

Jesus, in that first passage undermines a false understanding of prayer where we think we have to earn God's ear. He comes against that aggressively. **We do not pray to put our time in with God as a good work so that we will earn credits with God, then God will answer. No, no. We come because Jesus has made a way.** We come because in the name of Jesus we are completely forgiven. Everything that separated us from God is removed, and we have free access, Romans 5. I stand in a place of favor and grace before God in the name of Jesus. **I come in Jesus' name. He says just talk to your Father and receive.**

In today's passage, again I think we are surprised, because it almost seems like Jesus is contradicting what he has previously said. Because here he tells us to ask, to seek, to knock. In fact, if we understand the language, it's in the

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present tense. It's ask, keep on asking, don't stop asking. Seek, keep on seeking, don't stop seeking. Knock, keep on knocking, don't stop knocking. This is the clear emphasis of this text, and there happens to be two very specific parallel texts. One is in Luke 11 and one is in Luke 18. In both of those texts, **Jesus, in an even stronger fashion, emphasizes that prayer is an ongoing asking.**

In fact, let me share this main idea with you. I'd like you to get this definition of prayer. **Prayer is pouring out your heart to God in continual receiving or continual asking. This is the nature of prayer itself. I come before God and I open my soul. I pour out my needs, my concerns, my desires, my wants. I put *everything* before God. I pour it out and I continue to stay in a posture of asking and receiving, because this is the nature, this is the heart of prayer.**

Eugene Peterson wrote the translation of the Bible called The Message. Some of you may have used it. He recently passed away in the last few weeks. As a pastor, he used to bemoan the fact that he would go to an event and he'd be asked to pray. They would start this event with prayer. There was a committee meeting or a game or a concert or an event. He said there was something about the way we practice this public prayer that is completely contrary to the real nature of prayer. He used this word picture. It's like a starting pistol at a race that shoots blanks. It starts the race, but the real event is the race. He said we don't understand prayer when it's reduced to this ceremony, this formalism, something that we just have to throw up before God.

No, we pour out our hearts to God, and we really see that in the Psalms. **The Psalms are the prayer book of the Bible. They teach us. They give us a vocabulary to call out to God.** When you read the Psalms you are like, "Oh, that's intense!" Then there's this cry: "God, deliver me! Help me! Save me! I'm desperate! My heart yearns for you!" And brutal honesty: "Lord, destroy my enemies! Kill them!" Amen, yeah. Didn't know I could pray that way. This is the raw, real, act of prayer where you pour out your heart to God, and God meets us and God does miraculous things. It is a fantastic, marvelous promise that God gives us.

Think about this for a moment. He doesn't just tell you to ask. He tells you to ask, seek, and knock – three words to say the same thing. They give a different angle, but they are basically saying to you: **"Go to receive."** They are all worded in the present tense, which means it's to be a continual activity, so asking, seeking, knocking. Then on top of it, he repeats the same trilogy in the form of a promise. If you ask, you will receive. If you seek, you will find. If you knock and you keep on knocking, it will be opened to you. Jesus is pushing this in a way where you see, "Okay, I'm not heard because of my many words, but **prayer is not just a one and done thing. I continue in a place of receiving.**"

If you will allow me, let me reference Luke 11 and Luke 18. In Luke 11, Jesus gives us this exact same teaching. He tells about a friend who comes at midnight. He gives a little story to bring this home. In the culture of the day, hospitality was

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highly valued. If a friend came to visit you, it was a shameful thing to not be able to share something with your guest and to warmly receive them.

So, a friend comes to his neighbor at midnight. He knocks on the door and the neighbor is in bed and it says his kids are in bed with him. You know, there's always this debate about whether or not your kids can get in bed with you. If you need a biblical precedent, just go to Luke 11, okay? It's right there. I'm not teaching on that, but use it anyway. He knocks on the door and says, "Hey, I need bread! Open the door!" The friend says, "What is wrong with you? It's midnight! I'm in bed, my kids are in bed. Go away!" But the friend just keeps knocking on the door. "Open the door! I need bread! I cannot go back and face these important guests without something to give them." Finally, not because he's his friend but because he just won't leave him alone, he gets up and he gives him bread. He says, "How much more will your heavenly Father, who loves you, who treasures you, how much more will he respond to your asking?"

In Luke 18 the story again is told, this time about a widow who has no power, no influence, no authority. She has been taken advantage of. She goes to a judge, but this judge is wicked. He's unjust. He doesn't care about righteousness. This widow comes and just persists and persists and persists. Finally, the judge says, "This woman will not leave me alone." He doesn't grant her justice because he cares about justice. He gives her her request because of her much asking, because she won't leave him alone.

In Luke 11, Jesus summarizes that by saying, "How much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him? In Luke 18, "How much more will your heavenly Father give justice to those who ask him?" Those are commentaries on our passage today, where we are told **the Father is going to give you good things if you ask him.**

We went on vacation many years ago to a super nice resort in Canada. I was in way over my head. My wife and I were skiing with some friends. They were staying on the concierge level and I was staying on the pastors' level. There were two different prices and two different experiences. When I checked in, I said, "Hey, I have friends here. They are on the concierge level. How about an upgrade?" He said, "Well, that would cost ____." I was like, "Wow. You don't understand. I don't want to buy the room; I just want to use the bed and the room for a few nights." He said no.

That night I passed by the front desk and said, "Hey, is my upgrade ready?" He goes, "Nope, no, no." Next morning I go by the desk, "Hey, is my upgrade ready?" He goes, "Yes, Mr. Brookins. Here is your upgrade." Sometimes it's just in the asking, in the natural. Jesus is using this fundamental, natural principle to say James 4: "You have not because you ask not." So we come before the Lord. If this is true, naturally, Jesus is saying, "How much more will your heavenly Father, who loves you with a perfect love, how much more will he respond? **He will not be deaf to your request. This is the nature of prayer.**

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What I want to do is say, “Okay then, why?” If you stop and think about it, why does God orchestrate kingdom life in this manner? Why do I pray this way? Because it’s difficult and there’s such an emphasis on it, there must be a reason. So what happens when I pray according to biblical prayer? Here it is. Two things happen.

1. **Prayer changes things.**
2. **Prayer changes me.**

This is God’s agenda for us in all of life. God is bringing his kingdom. He is bringing restoration. He is transforming and renewing all things. Creation belongs to God, and it has fallen because of a rejection, a sin, a rebellion against God. So Jesus has come, the Son of God, to bring restoration. These two things are not separate, but they are intertwined, because God is bringing his kingdom to you as he brings his kingdom through you.

You are wanting to pray, “Lord, I’m asking you for your financial provision. I am asking you that all of my six children will know you and love you and serve you. I am asking you, God, to bless my marriage. I am asking you, God, to provide for every need. God wants to do more in your life than just give you those requests. Now, he does, not always in the way you ask, but prayer changes things. And **we experience God transforming us as we call out to him in prayer.**

1. **Prayer changes things.**

I had an experience with one of my sons. He has gone through Marine officer school. Two summers ago he went. He is a student at Texas A&M and he wants to fly for the Marines, so he went to officer school. If you don’t know how that works, you go, then when you graduate you get commissioned and you jump into the military. This is a good story for Veterans Day, which is tomorrow -- just to thank God for those who have served. We appreciate you. We are grateful.

I’m humbled by the fact that my son wants to do this. I’m also troubled by it. This is a big deal, right? This is not something you flippantly do. So he goes the first summer, two summers ago, and about two thirds of the way through he gets sent home. He is devastated. He gets dropped. Now, he tells this story. He is very open. He is very public about it. I’m not telling anything that he wouldn’t tell you himself. He had given so much to this and it seemed like such a flippant thing to me, the way he got sent home -- I was really troubled.

I wasn’t troubled because he wouldn’t be a marine or anything like that, because I believe God has a path for him. I was really worried about the impact on his own soul. So he comes home and to my dismay he says, “No, I’m doing this. I’m going to go back. I’m going to go through the whole review process. I’m going to get in. I’m going to jump through all those hoops. I’m going to get in. I’m going to go again.

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Shortly before the second summer that he went, we were sitting out back and he was telling me, “Well, my diet’s about to change and a lot of things are about to change. I said, “You know what, I will do this with you. I will change my diet. I’ll use this as an occasion to try to get in a little bit better shape. I’ll get in marine shape with you.” Did you really just laugh out loud at that? I told you I believe in miracles! So, my son seizes the moment and says, “Dad, listen. You’ve got to get to the gym more than two or three times a week. You’ve got to do this.” He starts laying out something. So I set this goal. I go to my coach, go to my wife and say, “Alright, I’m in!”

Now, this is what happened. Every day, 70 something days in my journal, Day 1 of 70 days, Day 2 of 70 days: “Lord, I’m praying for this son. I’m asking you. I don’t want to see him get sent home. I want to see him pass. I want to see him do well. Lord, I’m praying.” This went on and on and on. I know he’s praying. He can’t talk to me. I don’t even want a phone call, because the phone call probably means something not good.

So, the end comes and he graduates. My wife and I go up to Quantico. We see him graduate. He’s in the leadership team, top nine graduates. I’m saying, “Wow! God, you are amazing!” When it was finished, there was this sense of, “God, you’ve done this. He’s a very imperfect man. He’s got a long way to go, but clearly you’ve done this and I’m grateful.”

Then, this is why I tell you this story. Once school starts again, he gets back into school and he is notified that he’s the #1 graduate in his class in his level for the Marine Corps and that he’s going to get a commendation from the commandant. And it’s going to be presented to him at a Texas A&M football game in front of 100,000 people on the field. They fly in a general and my wife and I are down there on the field.

I’ve got other sons there. One son is going out on the field with two generals. The other son is over getting his picture taken with Mrs. Texas. Now, listen to me. This son has a long way to go. He’s far from perfect. He would tell you himself, “This was just the grace of God.”

Why do I tell you this story? Because I thought God had answered the prayer when he graduated. But when I saw how God established him in this track, there was this sense of, “Man, this is supernatural.” **Prayer changes things.**

1. Prayer changes me.

We own this building as a church because God gave it to us. We are experiencing the restoration of this property and this city, and this community because God is doing it. When we sold our property in Coral Springs, we were told by cities: “We don’t want you. You will take property off the tax roll. We are going to fight you. We don’t want you.” It was one

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of those things where it was so dramatic, we were saying, “I just don’t know that we are going to even find a city that will do it.”

When we first sold our old church building in Coral Springs, I looked at this property within the first two or three weeks. It was in such disrepair I said, “I don’t even want to go in.” Didn’t go in, completely forgot about it. When we were without a church building for two years, this place looked really good. And when our administrator at the time found it and we negotiated out the price, God had changed me to prepare me for the place that he wanted us to bring his kingdom.

When that happened, I was thinking, “You know, cities don’t want us. This is a retail property. Half of that will come off the tax rolls. I don’t know if they’ll let us do this.” Some of you who were here then know this story. I called our attorney, our city specialist who was helping us with all these zoning issues. I said, “Hey, can you tell me -- what does North Lauderdale think? Will we be successful?”

This is what he said. He said, “Well, Brian, I have bad news and good news. The bad news is: I am the city attorney for North Lauderdale, so I cannot represent you. The good news is: I am the city attorney for North Lauderdale. We knew we had a friend to help us. The city manager was a born again Christian. The mayor was a born again Christian. They called us and they said, “Listen, not only do we want you to buy this, we will expedite the buildout. We will pay for part of it, then we’ll rent it back from you to put a charter school in for the first few years.

What I’m telling you is that prayer changes things. And it changes not just the things, but God changes us, because God wants to bring restoration in us and through us. So the heartache that we feel when we are saying, “God, I’m asking you to do a work of grace in my child, or in my occupation, or my career, or whatever it is,” and the angst we feel because it’s not happening is so purposeful from God.

One of the aspects of transformation that we’ve learned about in the Sermon on the Mount is that we do what we do because of what we love. Jesus taught that the treasures of our hearts are actually what’s pushing out all of our behavior. It’s so strong in us he told that little eye parable. Do you remember? He said that if the light in us is darkness, oh how great is the darkness! He is saying that when we see something, we will interpret it according to what we love and really want in our hearts.

You’ve seen it, right? You’ve seen a person say, “I’m going to marry this person,” and you are like, “Wow, this person? I don’t see that happening.” “Oh, isn’t she wonderful?” “Yeah, but there’s this concern.” “Yeah, yeah, that’s actually a good thing.” And the more you say, the more they interpret it in terms of what they want, right? You’ve seen that, right? You’ve probably done that, right? Well, if you haven’t done it in that area, you’ve done it in other areas in your life.

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That makes transformation very, very difficult. Because if I say to you this morning: “God wants to make you a generous person.” Or, “God wants to do a work of sexual purity and integrity and generosity in your life,” you’re over here. I’m over here. And I have these loves, and they are not these loves. I mean, the ideal sounds good, right? But the actual living it out? “Oh, I love this.” **So, transformation is a transformation of the heart. It’s wanting, loving new things, different things.**

Jesus started the Sermon on the Mount by saying to us, “This is the true path to happiness: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” **What if what you’ve wanted all along is bad for you?**

We have two dogs. It feels like 20 dogs sometimes, but we have two. And in South Florida we have these demon frogs. I’m sorry if that offends you, but we have these big toads that are poisonous. A dog will get those, they’ll ingest poison and they can die. And they want these frogs -- like, if you go out at night, they go after them. We’ve had one of our dogs get one a couple of times and we’ve had to wash their mouth out and do all that stuff. **What if what we want is actually spiritually toxic for us? But we just want it.** We are pulling on the leash. We are pulling on God’s leash so hard. Why can’t I have this?! Because it will kill you. Because it will smother the spiritual life right out of you. You will choke and gag on this.

The Lord transforms us so that we have the capacity for God and for true happiness, and for his kingdom. It’s a makeover of our hearts that happens as we continually bring our desires and pour our hearts out to God. The fear that rises up in us is this. You know what? If I say, “Alright God, I want to be patient, or I want to be generous; do this in me,” what is the fear? God is going to bring me some kind of trial like you have never seen before. I want this, but I won’t get it. I’ll be disillusioned.

What does he say in these words? He says, “Listen, what kind of father would do that? What kind of father would use the occasion of your abandon to him to do something that would hurt you? Trust him. Trust him. Abandon yourself to him.” He disarms that very temptation that is constantly brought before us, where we accuse God and say, “God can’t be trusted.” He tells us, “No, no, no, no. **Trust him. This is the pathway to true happiness.**”

Many years ago I counseled a young couple. They were broken and hurting in their marriage. I said, “God’s going to restore your marriage. I’m telling you. I really believe that God is going to restore your marriage.” This young woman was just devastated and she said to me, “I don’t want God to restore this marriage. I don’t love him and I don’t want to love him.”

I said, “You know what? I’m going to pray, and I believe that God is going to not just restore your love for him, but that you are going to want to love him, and it’s going to be greater than anything you’ve ever imagined.” Now, it was messier

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than what I'm condensing for you, but God did it. God did it. That couple moved away, but if they were here, they would tell you, "I'm so glad that God had mercy on my soul, that God didn't give me what I wanted in the moment -- that demon toad."

Let's end with this thought. What does this look like in my life? For me, it looks like journaling. It's a tool I use. No one has to do that, but I write out the things that are on my heart all the time. And over weeks and months I see how the request itself takes a different shape as God shapes my heart. Sometimes the answer comes quickly. Sometimes it takes a long time.

There are strongholds in my own life – sin and pride – and I marvel at their tenacity. I say, "God, why can I not get past this sooner? Why can I not grow past this? The people in my life suffer because of these strongholds. **But God answers prayer. He changes things. He changes me and he changes you over time as we persevere. Do not believe the lie that it's how much time or a work that you put in. Just stay before God in an attitude of receiving. Ask and keep on asking. Seek and keep on seeking. Knock and keep on knocking.**