

What is prayer? I remember my earliest conscious days of following Jesus. I grew up in the church, so I don't really remember a time before Jesus, but I remember when I consciously began to follow Jesus, and I was pretty all in. I was like, loving your neighbor, absolutely. Count me in on studying the scriptures. Love it. Preach the gospel. Absolutely. But prayer? Prayer felt a little bit more like something you had to do. Like that's what good Christians did. It was something akin to spiritual vegetables. We all know it's good for you, but often we suffer through the broccoli. It felt more like that to me.

There are all sorts of questions that were evoked within me. If God's all-powerful and all-knowing, then why does it matter? He already knows the requests of my heart. If God knows every hair on my head, certainly he knows the thoughts that are within my mind. Prayer felt much more in the ought to category rather than the want-to category.

There are all sorts of confusion around prayer. I've grown in this obviously, but in the past few years, I've come awake to a new reality of prayer and come to see it differently. But the reality is, when you read a text like that, questions are evoked in all of us.

Years ago, Lindsay and I were traveling. We had already left late, and the traffic was challenging. So on the way there, I'm thinking that we're not going to find a parking spot. We're going to be later than we need to be. And I'm voicing this to Lindsay, who says, "No, I've already prayed for a parking spot. So we pull up and I'm thinking, "Yeah, whatever. I'm the pastor. I'll take it from here. Don't worry." I'm thinking that this is not how the Lord operates. Right when we drive into the parking lot, a car is backing out right in the front. As we're pulling in, I'm thinking, "Does prayer work?"

So often, Lindsay is a woman of prayer and has a lot of faith in those ways. She continues to pray, and we see things happen. But the problem was, and I didn't notice this until much later on, Lindsay was living in the reality of the text, "Ask and you'll receive. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened." But it wasn't until a few years later, as I was reflecting on that particular circumstance, that I came across this text, and there was something that just didn't sit right with me.

What I didn't put together back then was that the appointment we were going to was an infertility doctor. For three years, we had been praying to have a second child and had been told over and over by doctors that we would not have a second child. It was not possible. So I'm reflecting back on this and thinking, "Lord, why

would you care so much and hear our prayers on something as menial as a parking spot, but this deep longing of my heart, that seems like a good prayer to bring, you didn't answer for years?"

We were seeking and knocking, and it seemed that all we got was silence on the other end. What do you do with that? I'm guessing I'm not the only one who has had that experience. You guys know my story. We do have a second daughter, and that's a different story for a different time. I recognize that even that particular story isn't the story of so many of you in here who struggle with that particular issue. But the problem is, what do we do with prayer? It seems so arbitrary at times, and yet the text in Matthew 7 seems so direct. Everyone who asks it will be given. Everyone who seeks, will find; everyone who knocks, the door will be open.

Out of all the things that Jesus has taught on prayer, there may not be a more famous and more confusing teaching text than our text today. On the one hand, these words seem to issue a very straightforward, empowering invitation. But on the other hand, the invitation seems not to deliver consistently, or if at all.

It doesn't offer predictable results. It feels formulaic, yet all of us who have followed Jesus for some time have some experience where we've prayed and sought the Lord and have knocked, yet the door continues to be closed. What do you do with a text like this, with a promise like this?

There's a beautiful brilliance to Jesus here. As we're going along in the Sermon on the Mount, we're reaching the end of the very core. But in there, Jesus is dragging along the text that he just taught and introducing new comments, and all of those overlap in concentric circles. So there is a reading of this particular text that makes a whole lot of sense, going right out of the do not judge.

Jesus is saying to ask for wisdom. Seek wisdom, knock and it will be given to you. There's a long legacy in the scriptures about that, and that's an accurate reading of the text, but I want to broaden it out a little bit more because what Jesus is offering is a wider lens on the topic of prayer. I'm not alone in having wrestled with this particular story. We're going to pick up right where we left off last week.

**"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. Matthew 7:7-8**

Ask, seek, knock—these three verbs interlock and work together because it's a way in which Jesus is saying these three lay a framework, a trail as to the common journey of prayer. All of these three elements coalesce and come together, linking and collectively describing the layout of the journey of prayer. So let's unpack it one at a time.

## **Ask**

First ask. This means exactly what you'd think it means. It's straightforward. All three of these are quite straightforward, but to ask means to request, to call for, to crave, to desire. Often, this is the beginning point of prayer. Not always, but almost every time, prayer begins with need. We have a need, and therefore we rightly bring that before God. He desires and longs for us to ask for his presence. And so requests are generally preceded by some need.

That need could be financial uncertainty. It could be healing after a car accident, the anxiety of a loss of a job, a diagnosis, the heartbreak of divorce, a breakup, or a wayward child. It could be anything. Anything from a parking spot to struggling with infertility and all of those needs in between.

When he says ask, he means it. Ask. In our typical experience of life, we tend to go along working with the Lord, with the illusion of control, and everything operates fine. But at some point, the life we're living contrasts with the reality of the world. All of a sudden, we have a fracture between what is real in the world and what we assume will be the end of the world. In that moment, that's when we come before the Lord and say that this is different than what I had anticipated. It all begins there with a need and asking.

## **Seek**

That brings us to seek. This verb is similar. It means exactly what you'd think it means. This is actually a pretty common verb if you were to trace the idea of seeking from Genesis to Revelation. It is almost always in connection and relationship to God, meaning the object of the seeking is God. Over and over you'll see it. Throughout the Psalms, you'll see the command to seek the Lord. It means that it is specific.

It also means something a bit larger. It can mean for the mind to search for truth. The heart's pursuit of relationship, the will's determination to obtain something, and the body's movement to find. We come asking for good gifts, but we're invited to pursue God in a searching type of relationship. When we come along in that journey, it begins with asking for the good gifts. But what we find in the seeking is that God reveals himself as the giver, and our hearts get connected in relationship to the giver.

## **Knock**

The third is knock, and this final verb is the destination of the prayer journey. It's where all of it has been pointing to. This idea of knocking throughout the scriptures alludes to table fellowship.

Think of this most explicitly in Revelation 3:20. *"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me."* Knocking evokes the imagery of communion with God around a table.

The promise in Revelation 3:20 is similar to that in Matthew 7. You can hear the echoes. Anyone who knocks on the door will have it opened, and communion will be offered. This is a clear image of welcome even in today's world, but it was even more radical in Jesus' world. If you go all the way back to the table welcome series, we talked a lot about how the first century organized community around tables and had far greater depth than how we do in our fast-food type culture.

It still has some meaning, but often it's gathering to share some food together so we can get some nutrition and then move along. But in the first century, to eat with someone wasn't just to tolerate their presence. It was to re-instill or affirm the dignity of the other, to welcome them in the totality of who they are.

In some ways, it is a beautiful reminder that Jesus doesn't just tolerate our presence. He offers the greatest invitation through prayer, ask, seek, and knock. It is Jesus saying that you are welcome into his presence. You are welcome into relationship. Prayer is fundamentally an invitation to commune with God, and it's the invitation to meet God in some of the deepest parts of what it means to be human.

We often reduce prayer to just the first part of the process, the exchanging of petitions and asks, which is a healthy, important thing. The Lord wants to hear those things. But there's a deeper journey that God is inviting us into, and it's that of relationship.

What may make this difficult amongst a lot of things is that to pray, if it's aimed at your deepest longings, mixed with relationship to God, is wildly vulnerable. Because that means you have to open up your heart. For Lindsay and me, in that three-year stretch, it meant every single month, "Lord, this is what we desire." It opened up pain points, opened up the heart of our longing. Having thoughts of what happens if he doesn't respond. What happens if he doesn't seem to hear? Yes, petitions are exchanged, and answers are given, but the point of all of it has always been aiming toward communion with God. This is what Jesus meant when he said to knock.

The prayer journey with Jesus is that we come for the gifts, and we get the giver. Then we find that we're welcomed into his presence around the table. But, if you're like me, you're skeptical. I totally understand because the examples I've used and the examples that you have are that this vulnerability and invitation to communion are largely dependent on whether one trusts God. Prayer is vulnerable, so if we're to open up the vulnerable parts of our souls before God, we have to then trust the character of who God is. That's exactly what Jesus does in verses 9 through

11: he instills in us a confidence rooted not in our ability to show up and pray right, but rather in the goodness of God's character.

**"Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! Matthew 7:9-11**

Think back to the plank and the speck thing. This is Jesus being funny, and the simplicity and the humor of it are the point. He's saying to think of all the parents in here. If your child asked you for bread, would you offer a stone? The ridiculousness of that idea is exactly the point. Of course not. He is saying that if you were to ask and bring those requests before an earthly father or mother, how much more will God provide even better than what you asked for.

This is the same logic and rationality that Jesus has used over and over and deployed in different parts of the text. He has always done this lesser-to-greater rationality. The earthly father is lesser than the heavenly Father. And so even the lesser father will give good gifts. How much more than would the heavenly Father? All things that are good come from the Father. It's the same exact rationality.

Jesus grounds our asking, seeking, and knocking in the character of God and says that you can bring this, asking, seeking, and knocking, because it's rooted in the goodness of the Heavenly Father.

Here's the uncomfortable truth. All of that sounds well and good, but just like I've said a few times now, many of us are rightly skeptical because we also recognize that sometimes we have asked and didn't receive. Sometimes we have sought and didn't find. Sometimes we've knocked, and the door remained closed. What do you do then with unanswered prayer?

It's the question that haunts this whole text. It's the question that haunts us. Jesus, at a different point in Luke 18, tells a separate story that gets at the same concept. In Matthew 7, the three verbs ask, seek, and knock are in a Greek tense that we have no grammatical equal to in English. So, some of it is a bit lost in translation, but the tense in Greek for ask, seek, and knock is the present active imperative, which means that it's a current act that has an ongoing, continuous dimension to it. So, in other words, Jesus is saying when you ask, seek, and knock and don't have it given to you, or have the door open to you, keep on asking, keep on seeking, and keep on knocking.

The New Living Translation translates it just that way, which is the most literal way to translate it. *"Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you"* (Matthew 7:7, NLT). Notice the persistence, but notice as well that at times it goes over like a lead balloon. It's not a very satisfying answer. You're

opening up the deepest parts of your soul before the Lord, you're offering it to him, and he says to just keep asking, seeking, and knocking.

In Luke 18, Jesus offers a different parable because Jesus, and you may not have ever thought of this, knows what it's like to have prayers go unanswered. From my reading of the New Testament, there are three instances where it seems like Jesus' prayers are unanswered. The first one comes from Mark 8, where Jesus prays to heal a blind man. Jesus does the dirt and the spit thing, and wipes it on the man's eyes, and his eyes open. Jesus asked if the man could see. He said he could see humans, but they looked like trees, which is true. You or I might look like a tree. But Jesus then had to redo the miracle. Isn't that odd? It's like somehow he didn't wipe the mud out properly enough or something. But there's a way in which you could understand that as an unanswered prayer.

Maybe most acutely Mark 14, Jesus is in Gethsemane moments before he's about to be arrested, he knows what's about to take place. He's going to go to the cross, he's going to be crucified, and he's going to suffer a horrendous death. And what is his prayer? Father, take this cup from me, but not my will, yours be done." In that moment, he's asking, "Lord, I don't want it if there's any other way." Luke says he was grieved and in sorrow to the point of death. Jesus was in agony. Jesus was asking God if there's any other way to take this, but not my will, yours be done. Which of course is instructive on its own, but God doesn't respond in the way that Jesus asked.

Then John 17, the high priestly prayer. This is the one that was most fascinating to me. But in that prayer, Jesus is praying for the church. He's praying for us as disciples, and he prays to God, and he says, "Lord, may the church, may your followers be one, as you and I are one." What I find most fascinating about this unanswered prayer for God is that the church today is fractured into a million pieces. Jesus is currently living in the reality of an unanswered prayer. He longs for us to be made one. Yet when you look at the Big C Church, we're fractured into a lot of pieces.

Jesus understands what an unanswered prayer is like. So, of course, we're going to have some of those, and that might be part of the reason that Jesus tells this story. What's interesting about this parable is usually when Jesus tells parables, he buries the lead a little bit and hides the meaning of it. But here, Luke spoils it for us. *"Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up"* (Luke 18:1). That's what this parable's about. Jesus encouraging his followers to always pray and never give up even when it's unanswered. That's the thesis statement right up front. Let's dive into the story.

**He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' "For some time he refused.**

**But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care what people think, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually come and attack me!'" Luke 18:2-5**

The invitation for us in this parable is that we are that persistent widow. We're the ones coming before the judge, asking him to just offer this justice. There's been something wrong, and over and over and over this woman, this widow, comes back to this judge. That's the invitation. Continue to pray. Keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking.

But the question you're asking is if we are the persistent widow in the text, isn't God the unjust judge? Isn't the unjust judge the one who seemingly is uninterested. He's a pretty slimy character. He doesn't care what people think. He doesn't even care about God. He is totally distant, totally removed. He simply wants this woman off his back.

Don't we often feel like that in prayer? Isn't that what God is like? We bring our unanswered prayers, we ask and seek and knock, and it's like does God even hear me? I mean, isn't this a horrible picture of the character of God? What happened to Matthew 7, the good heavenly Father who gives the good gifts? Thankfully, Jesus actually explains the text, and he's not doing that at all.

**And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" Luke 18:6-8**

This is the same lesser-to-greater rationality that's been used all through the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is not comparing himself to the unjust judge. He's distinguishing himself from the unjust judge. It says, "Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones who cry out to him day and night?" Jesus is saying that he is not like that judge.

That sounds a whole lot like the earthly father in Matthew 7, in which "Even then though you are evil." Who's evil? The judge is evil. *"If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" (Matt. 7:11).* See the unjust judge is not God. That's like the earthly father. When we come to prayer, we are called to be persistent.

Listen to the way Eugene Peterson, in his book *Tell It Slant*, talks about this particular parable.

**If we think that the silence of God before our prayers is a matter of calloused indifference, think again. God is the exact opposite of the evil judge in the story, opposite in every detail. Prayer is not begging God to do something for us that he doesn't know about, or begging God to do something for**

**us that he is reluctant to do, or begging God to do something that he hasn't time for. In prayer, we persistently, faithfully, trustingly come before God, submitting ourselves to his sovereignty, confident that he is acting, right now, on our behalf. We are his 'chosen ones,' and don't ever forget it. God is, right now...working his will in your life and circumstances. So keep praying. Don't quit. Peterson**

The confidence comes from our understanding that Jesus, right in this moment, is right now at the right hand of the Father interceding on our behalf. He is bringing those prayers and that text in Luke 18:8b is, *"Will God find anyone with faith on earth?"* I understand that that may sound callous still, but let's zoom out one layer deeper, because there's something in this.

There are two reasons for confidence as to why we can keep asking, seeking, knocking, and have the assurance of the promise in Matthew 7. Look back at Luke 18:7a. *"And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones?"* The first place of confidence is our relationship to God—we are the chosen ones. This is all over Romans 8.

We talked about Romans 8 last week, in which there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ. Paul unpacks this beautifully throughout the book of Romans in that if we are found in Christ, that is where our life is secured.

Now the second point of confidence is important. This comes in verse 8. *"I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8).* That statement, when the Son of Man comes, is a confident statement about where the whole story is going. Our prayers and confidence before the Lord in all that we ask, seek, and knock is that we are his chosen ones and the story is going somewhere.

It's going to a time in Revelation 20 and 21 in which all things are healed and reconciled to God. The question is not will your prayer be answered, it's when. The hard part for all of us is that we can't figure that out. For Lindsay and my story, it happened to be three years later, after we wrestled with how to have a kid, and yet God answered that prayer.

That may not be the story for so many of you. You're still asking, you're still seeking, and you're still knocking. You're in the midst of a diagnosis that doesn't look good. You're looking out over the horizon, asking God why can't he just heal it? Just take the cancer away. But when the Son of Man comes, there will be no more cancer. I can't give you an answer as to why he may not do it now, but I can, with full confidence, say there is coming a day in which all cancer will be removed.

There's coming a day when all sickness will be removed. That doesn't make the waiting any easier. I know that. But do not forget that the Lord is also sitting in unanswered prayer. He's



with you in the midst of it. Keep asking, keep seeking, and keep knocking.

That was the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 4, when Jesus comes on the scene and when he lays out the thesis for the whole sermon, he says, "*The kingdom of heaven is here,*" which means that thing that was out in the future, that new hope of creation, Revelation 21 and 22, has broken into the here and now.

We get bits and pieces of it. It breaks in, and we experience that. For whatever reason, sometimes the cancer is removed. Sometimes the wayward kid does come home. But other times it doesn't. I get that. We are living in that tension of the in between, which as our identity is those who are the chosen ones, it has shifted in such a way that we are now in Christ, which will one day be, all in all, a new creation. So when we come to faith in the Lord, our identity is transferred from this present age that's passing away into the age to come.

In that overlap, it will sting and hurt. Jesus promises that in this world we will have trouble, but this world, in its present state, is passing away. There's a new world breaking in, and at some point we pray, and the cancer may persist for a time, but it will eventually be eradicated. There will come a time in which God's good creation will be restored. It will be reconciled, whether it's on this side of resurrection or the next, but that day is coming.

When we suffer unanswered prayer, what happens is that it narrows our scope to the immediate. That makes sense because when pain strikes, when you're hurt, when disappointment happens, whenever that happens, of course, it narrows your focus. It gets you into this moment right in front of you, and it's really hard to see the broader story because we want God to break in and do the thing that he has done before. We ask, seek, and we knock and say, "Lord, could you do this?"

The wonderful thing is whether or not it happens in this moment or in the next, the invitation goes all the way back to what I opened the sermon with. The invitation of prayer has been to relationship. So even when you ask, seek, and knock and it isn't answered, you're still around the table with the Lord.

He's welcoming you home. He's allowing you to experience the community that we will one day experience. The end of the story is that death and all of its friends will be eradicated, defeated, and done away with and destroyed.

What's hard for us today is that we don't know what form of death we are sitting with. I don't know if the form of death that you're experiencing is a diagnosis that you desperately want God to take away. I don't know if the form of death is a marriage that's shaken to its core, and you're barely holding on. I don't know if it's the desire for a family, but infertility continues. I don't know if it's the fear of uncertainty of a lost job and financial instability. I don't know if it's the broken heart from a friendship, a wayward

child, an unanswered why, or whatever it is, but I will promise you that you can always have a seat at the table with God. Knock and the door will be opened.

I've alluded to it a few times, but in the book of Revelation, there's a fascinating scene. I want you to flip there in Revelation 5. There's this dramatic scene in which there's these 24 elders and all these angels that are before the Lord. They're in the throne room of heaven, and God is sitting on the throne and they're all worshipping there.

There's this scroll, which is the deed to the earth, meaning whoever can open the scroll is the one who has all authority over all of the created order. So God is there on his throne and he's holding that scroll. But the problem is that no one seems to be able to open the seven seals. This scene unfolds, and they're getting a little more desperate.

**Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. The Lamb had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. He went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people. Revelations 5:6-8**

Do you know what that means? That means every single prayer you have ever prayed, every seemingly small, insignificant prayer. Every prayer you've forgotten, every prayer that you're still waiting for an answer, every prayer that broke out in sob from an agonizing heart, every prayer you've ever uttered, God has collected for you in that bowl, and it's being held there right before the throne.

In Revelation 8, it says that God takes those prayers and when the time is right, he throws them over all of creation. What happens at that point is that it initiates the beginning in which all death is removed from the earth, and your prayers become the seedbed of new creation.

It is stunning. Your prayers have not been forgotten. They've been treasured by God, held before that throne waiting for the time when he throws them over creation. And it's in that moment that all those prayers, that angst, that hurt, that pain that's hiding deep in your soul, it will, at the proper time, be answered by God.

Tyler Staton, in his book *Praying like Monks, Living like Fools*, has a great chapter on this text, which I borrowed a lot from.

**At the proper time, God is tipping the bowl, pouring out our requests on the earth. He has collected every prayer we've ever prayed, and redemption comes when he rains down those**

prayers on the earth once and for all. The renewal of the world, heaven, and earth restored as one, begins with God pouring out all the prayers of his children like a purifying fire with one great, resounding yes. Every prayer in the end is an answered prayer. Some are still awaiting that yes, but it's coming. That's the kind of 'judge' we're dealing with. Staton

Ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find. Knock, and the door will be open to you. My friends, we have not been left empty in our prayers. It often feels like it; the felt sense of God just doesn't seem to be there. But we can be assured that God is in the process, weaving history back to make all things new, and he's holding your prayers.

This is why the psalmist in Psalm 126 says, *"Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy" (Psalm 126:5)*. Those who sow with tears and the uncertainty and in the waiting, and it causes all sorts of tears to flow. "God, why won't you move? Where are you?" But the psalmist says that those who sow with tears will reap songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.

Keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking because some of you may know, even when we talk about tears, that it's not just prayers that God collects, but at the end of the story, God says, I will wipe away every tear, every broken heart, and every shed tear will be wiped away.

But for now, many of us wait and that's difficult. I know that this is a room that's full of people who have seen God break in. I have. I have been in hospital rooms in which the diagnosis didn't look good, and a swarm of people prayed, and God seemed to intervene. Suddenly, the X-rays showed something different. I've also sat in a hospital room next to the dying and held their hands. We prayed and God didn't move. But what I know through all of that, wherever God moves, is that one day all death and all of its friends will all be removed.

For centuries, the church has come up with this little, tiny prayer that's rooted in some of the last words in all of the scriptures. It's the Maranatha prayer that's just, "Come, Lord Jesus, come." And I believe that prayer has become a heart cry, a rally cry for the church as we recognize the tension we live in, hoping for all things to be made new, but living in the brokenness of that.

**Come, Lord Jesus, come.**

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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Catalog No.1492-13FC