

Series: Seek

Title: Growing through Prayer

Text: Matthew 7:7-12

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Matthew 7:7-12 uses the word “seek” within Jesus’ famous “Sermon on the Mount.” The passage contains some of our Lord’s most well-known instructions on prayer. In fact, the words of the passage are sometimes cited by those who don’t even profess to be Christian. In talking about prayer, Jesus urged His disciples to “ask,” “seek,” and “knock.”

As we continue our study on the pursuit of God by examining Scripture’s use of the word “seek,” it is necessary to give focus to the topic of prayer. According to the Bible, prayer is fundamental to the pursuit of God. Though man was made for communion with the Lord, sin thwarted God’s original plan for humanity. Once mankind enjoyed face-to-face interaction with the Lord (Genesis 3:8), but sin led to displacement from the Garden of God. Mankind was banned from God’s presence; thus, he had no direct way of interacting with his Creator (Genesis 3:20-24).

It wasn’t long before humanity was granted an avenue of interacting with God. Before expelling man and woman from Eden, the Lord made a sacrifice to cover their shame. Adam and Eve’s first two sons — Cain and Abel — were aware that sacrifices and offerings were needed to approach the Lord (Genesis 4:1-4). The Lord had set a precedent for such things before His expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden (Genesis 3:21); thus, the offspring of the first man and woman followed the Lord’s prescribed practices, even though one son did not do so from an upright heart (Genesis 4:5).

Eventually, the rest of humanity became aware of the opportunity to address God in worship. Adam and Eve had another son named Seth. He had a son named Enosh. It was during the days of Enosh that something remarkable happened in the course of human history — people began to pray! Scripture says, “A son was born to Seth also, and he named him Enosh. At that time people began to call on the name of the Lord” (Genesis 4:26).

Throughout the Old Testament, the people of God were instructed to pray, praise God, and offer sacrifices through various means. In the church age, believers have special access to God because of the work of Jesus. In all seasons and in every circumstance, they can approach God in prayer. Such a privilege is one of the greatest blessings of the Christian life. A.J. Gordon, the founder of Gordon College and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, once remarked on the priority of prayer by saying, “You can do more than pray after you have prayed; but you can never do more than pray until you have prayed.”¹ In what follows, we will examine the role of prayer in the pursuit of God by looking at four ideas from Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 7:7-12.

PERSEVERANCE IN PRAYER

¹ Gallaty, Robby. *Growing Up: How To Be a Disciple Who Makes Disciples*. (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2013), 65.

Jesus' teaching in Matthew 7:7-12 first emphasized the importance of persistence in prayer. Our Lord said, "Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7). Notice Jesus' mention of three different activities — asking, seeking, and knocking. Our Lord's three-fold use of action verbs in reference to prayer highlighted the need for persistence in prayer. Matthew's choice of verb tenses did as well. In the original language of the New Testament, the gospel writer used what is known as a present active imperative verb. The language depicted continual, habit-of-life activity. Thus, one has said the sense of Matthew 7:7 could be rendered, "Make it your habit to ask."²

Reserve a Time

Not long ago, I was listening to one of my favorites preachers via a podcast. He spoke of the need for persistence in prayer. Commenting on the way some are prone to offer short and hurried prayers, he offered advice. He suggested the use of an egg timer! He said one should reserve a time for pleading with the Lord in prayer and not quit until the time had expired! We certainly don't want to be legalistic or mechanical in prayer, but I believe the preacher had a point. When believers are tempted to be brief and casual in prayer, setting aside a period of time that is reserved especially for prayer is surely advisable.

I think we find precedent for such an approach from the life of our Lord. Matthew 26 provides a record of one of Jesus' most fervent prayer sessions. The scene of the prayer was the Garden of Gethsemane. The occasion of the prayer was the night before the crucifixion. In agony over the horrors that awaited Him, the Lord retreated, as He often did (Mark 1:35), to a solitary place for prayer.

In retreating to the garden, it was our Lord's intent to persistently seek the Lord in prayer for a reserved amount of time. He indicated such to be true when He invited His disciples to join Him in prayer. He had only taken James, John, and Peter into the inner-most recesses of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-37). Since they were His closest confidants in ministry, He wanted them to support Him in prayer during His darkest hour. Sadly, the three fell asleep while Jesus agonized in prayer. He rebuked them, saying, "So, couldn't you stay awake with me one hour? Stay awake and pray, so that you won't enter into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:40-41).

Our Lord's words demonstrated the need for persistence in prayer. Sure, there are times in which sleep is more important than prayer. However, believers should be vigilant that they don't become negligent in intercessions and supplications. By God's grace, they should work to build up spiritual endurance in regard to the discipline of prayer. Strong Christians don't give up on prayer at the first sight of difficulty or inconvenience.

Power to Persist in Prayer

Our Lord's words also demonstrated the means of persistence in prayer. Remember that the entire incident from the Garden of Gethsemane occurred shortly before Jesus' crucifixion. In fact, Jesus' prayers on that fateful evening centered on the cross that

² Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 16.

awaited our Lord. He prayed fervently because He dreaded bearing the weight of sin. Luke's gospel graphically described the scene, saying, "Being in anguish, he prayed more fervently, and his sweat became like drops of blood falling to the ground" (Luke 22:44). Despite the horror of encountering the wrath of God at Calvary, Jesus pressed on in prayer.

Our Lord's perseverance in prayer is the key to our perseverance in prayer. The author of Hebrews indicated that it is faith in Jesus' work that animates us to endurance in the Christian life. He said, "... Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us, keeping our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy that lay before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:1-2). Don't we often feel weak and weary in prayer? Scripture reveals that it is by focusing the eyes of faith on Jesus that we receive strength to press on in prayer.

Commenting on our tendency to falter in prayer, Charles Spurgeon once said, "Too many prayers are like boy's runaway knocks, given, and then the giver is away before the door can be opened. O for grace to stand foot to foot with the angel of God, and never, never, never relax our hold; feeling that the cause we plead is one in which we must be successful, for souls depend on it, the glory of God is connected with it, the state of our fellow man is in jeopardy."³ To seek God via prayer, and to see His power at work in our lives, we must learn to be persistent in prayer. The teaching of Jesus reveals such things are important. The life of Jesus makes such things possible.

A PERSPECTIVE IN PRAYER

To seek God in prayer, we must be aware of an important principle related to prayer. Scripture constantly reveals that faithful praying often involves a sense of need. Such truth is implied in Jesus' teaching in Matthew 7:7-12. He said, "For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened" (Matthew 7:8). Our Lord's use of the words "ask," "seek," and "knock" all referred to a certain type of prayer.

As we've noted earlier, the three-fold repetition of action verbs in Matthew 7:7-8 was intended to highlight the persistent nature of prevailing prayer. However, the words also highlighted a certain mode of praying. In particular, the words referred to the act of making requests in prayer. Out of all of the types of prayers we can pray, making requests in prayer is perhaps the most fundamental type of prayer. It is for this reason that Jesus used the act of requesting as a baseline type of prayer for His instruction on prayer in Matthew 7:7-12.

Scripture is replete with references to the act of making requests in prayer. In his teaching on spiritual warfare, Paul said, "Pray at all times in the Spirit with every prayer and *request*..." (Ephesians 6:18). The Greek word rendered "request" referred to a petition based on a specific need. The word literally meant "to make known." It

³ Spurgeon, C.H. *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit: 1869, Volume 15*. (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1970), 100-101.

depicted the act of one making a certain need known to others.⁴ Such things teach us that a sense of dependency upon God is at the core of Christian praying. Oswald Chambers was right when he said, “Prayer is the exercise of drawing on the grace of God.”⁵

Scripture uses the same language from Ephesians 6:18 over and over again to reference the act of making needs known through prayer. When Solomon prayed at the dedication of the temple, he lifted his voice and said, “But will God indeed live on earth? Even heaven, the highest heaven, cannot contain you, much less this temple I have built. Listen to your servant’s prayer and his petition, Lord my God, so that you may hear the cry and the prayer that your servant prays before you today...” (1 Kings 8:27-28). The Psalmist sang, “Blessed be the Lord, for he has heard the sound of my *pleading*” (Psalm 28:6). In another place he sang, “The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open *to their cry for help*” (Psalm 33:15). During the horrific desolation of Jerusalem during the Babylonian invasion, Jeremiah gave testimony to the way he made pleas through such prayer. He said, “I called on your name, Lord, from the depths of the pit. You heard my plea: Do not ignore my cry for relief. You came near whenever I called you; you said, ‘Do not be afraid’” (Lamentations 3:55-57).

The pages of the New Testament also reveal that a sense of need is at the heart of real prayer. Paul and James both used the Greek word for “request” in reference to Christian praying. In Philippians 4:6, Paul said, “Don’t worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and *petition* with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” James said, “Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is very powerful in its effect” (James 5:16).

At the most fundamental and basic level, prayer is the act of making a request of God. In fact the Greek word used of prayer most frequently in the New Testament (*proseuché*) is one ancient pagans used to speak of the act of approaching a pagan god for help.⁶ The apostles sanctified and Christianized the term, using it of prayer in the early church. Their choice of words teaches us that prayer, at its core, is an act of expressing our dependency upon the Lord. If you want to know how much you rely on the Lord, simply reflect on how much you pray! Philip Melancthon rightly observed, “Where there are no cares, there will generally be no prayers.”⁷

It is for good reason that Jesus spoke of prayer with words like “ask,” “seek,” and “knock.” His terminology revealed that faithful prayer grows from a sense of desperate need. One author has commented on this reality:

When we pray, we express our complete dependence on God. Prayer acknowledges what Jesus said...“You can do nothing without me”...When we pray

⁴ Zodiates, 399.

⁵ Chambers, Oswald. *My Utmost for His Highest*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House Publishers, 1994), June 26.

⁶ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 333.

⁷ Ryle, J.C. *Practical Religion*. (East Peoria, IL: Versa Press, Inc., 2015), 391.

and ask God for help, we are admitting that we are not...competent in ourselves to claim anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God...Prayer testifies that we are “poor in spirit”...that we are not strong but weak, and that, as the hymn says, we “need thee every hour.”⁸

If you find yourself deficient of a dependency on God in prayer, pray and ask that His grace would cultivate a sense of need in your soul.

A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP IN PRAYER

One of the most beautiful truths concerning prayer is that prayer is a relational activity. I learned this truth early in my Christian experience. A mentor who discipled me offered this definition of prayer — “Prayer is talking to God.” His definition was intended to underscore the relational nature of prayer. When we pray, we engage in a conversational activity with the Lord.

Jesus underscored these realities in His teaching about seeking God in Matthew 7:7-12. He told a hypothetical story, saying, “Who among you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him 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” (Matthew 7:9-11). The first-century world was a more community-oriented society than our modern, Western world. It was quite common for family members, and even neighbors, to share bread and basic provisions.

Jesus’ story painted an absurd scene. Bread and fish constituted the most basic forms of sustenance in a Mediterranean culture. No father would have withheld bread or fish from a son or daughter. Children could have expected a favorable reception when approaching a father with a request for food.

“Our Father”

Jesus’ example was meant to emphasize a matter-of-fact reality about Christian prayer. When they pray, disciples can always expect a positive response from the Lord. Such truth is verified through a famous prayer given by our Lord. On one occasion, one of the Twelve approached Jesus, asking, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John also taught his disciples” (Luke 11:1). In response to the inquiry, our Lord said, “Whenever you pray, say, Father, your name be honored as holy. Your kingdom come...” (Luke 11:2). Jesus then proceeded to give His disciples the rest of what is now known as “The Lord’s Prayer.”

Luke’s account of the Lord’s Prayer reveals a couple of important truths. First, it shows that Jesus is patient with those of us who struggle with knowing how to pray. Notice that a disciple humbly requested help with prayer and notice that Jesus graciously answered that request. If you don’t know how to pray, make this your first prayer — “Lord, please teach me how to pray.”

Second, Luke’s account reveals that prayer is a relational activity. For many first-century Jews, the thought of addressing God as “Father” may have seemed

⁸ Schreiner, R. Thomas. Humility In Prayer, Repentance, and Thanksgiving. *Tabletalk: Volume 46, No. 1*. (Sanford, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2022), 26.

strange. In fact, teaching from Jesus found later in Luke's gospel indicates that many first-century Pharisees addressed the Lord with the generic title "God" (Luke 18:11). Jesus invited His disciples to appeal to the Lord as "Father."

Through the Cross

Such a personal approach to prayer is granted to believers because of the work of Christ. The New Testament reveals that His work of salvation has made us adopted children in the family of God. Ephesians 1:5 says, "He predestined us to be adopted as sons through Jesus Christ for himself, according to the good pleasure of his will." Such an adoptive process occurs at the moment of regeneration. When we are saved, we are born again by God's Spirit (John 3:3). The Spirit's occupation of our souls births us into the family. In Romans, Paul said, "For all those led by God's Spirit are God's sons. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear. Instead, you received the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father!'" (Romans 8:14-15).

Though we were previously alienated from God because of our sins, the work of Christ brought us into the family of God. Because we are inhabited by the Spirit of God, we have the ability to relate to God in prayer. The tearing of the veil in the Temple at Christ's crucifixion was emblematic of these realities (Matthew 27:50). God's people can approach the Lord boldly, knowing that sins are forgiven and the the Lord views them as being perfectly righteous because of the work of Christ. The author of Hebrews said:

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens—Jesus the Son of God—let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin. Therefore, let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need (Hebrews 4:14-16).

As a pastor, I've found that many struggle with insecurity in prayer. They don't feel confident in addressing the Lord. Many are afraid of saying the wrong thing. Some are shy, wondering if the Lord really wants to hear from them. Others feel shame over sin; thus, they assume they are unworthy to talk to God. Jesus' teaching on prayer reveals that we do not need to worry about such things. If we are in Christ, we can have perfect confidence that the Lord delights in hearing our prayers. J.C. Ryle has said, "As a father loves the first stammering efforts of his child to speak, so the Lord loves the poor feeble petitions of his people."⁹

A PROMISE IN PRAYER

As we seek God through prayer, we have a wonderful promise from Jesus. In His teaching in Matthew 7:7-12, He indicated that the Heavenly Father takes delight in answering prayer. For all three of the metaphors He used in reference to prayer (ask, seek, and knock), Jesus spoke of a favorable response that each would receive, using

⁹ Ryle, J.C. *Practical Religion*. (Edinburg, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), 424.

words like “given to you,” “find,” “and the door will be opened to you” (Matthew 7:7-8). Jesus also said, “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” (Matthew 7:11).

An *A Fortiori* Argument

In making a promise concerning prayer, Jesus used what ancient philosophers would have called an “*a fortiori*” argument.¹⁰ The name of the argument literally meant “to the stronger.” In logic and reasoning, one would employ the device to draw a conclusion concerning a matter. In doing so, one would point from a weaker reality to a stronger one. The argument was known as the “lesser to greater” argument.¹¹ The intent was to show the truthfulness of something by pointing to a stronger conclusion. Jesus’ rationale went like this — if earthly fathers usually respond favorably to their children’s requests, one can trust that the Heavenly Father will respond favorably to His children’s requests. Believers should never be reluctant or timid to take their need to God in prayer!

The Benevolence of God

Jesus said, “...how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him” (Matthew 7:11). The Greek word translated “give” was used elsewhere in the New Testament to speak of the Lord’s willingness to answer prayer. In James 1:5, we read, “Now if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God—who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly—and it will be given to him.” James knew many of his readers needed wisdom for difficult situations in life. He encouraged them to pray for such wisdom. In doing so, he reminded them of the benevolent character of the Lord. When God’s people sincerely approach Him in prayer, they can have confidence of His goodwill toward them. The Lord is not a snarky, stingy God who likes to withhold from His people. Instead, He is loving and generous, ready to respond to their needs.

A Paternal Disposition

For first-century Jewish readers, Jesus’ words in Matthew 7 were likely reminiscent of teaching found in the Old Testament. The prophets often spoke of the Lord with parental language in order to picturesquely portray the Lord’s love for His chosen people. In Isaiah 49:15, the Lord spoke through the prophet Isaiah, saying, “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or lack compassion for the child of her womb? Even if these forget, yet I will not forget you.” The language of Isaiah 49:15 was maternal. Jesus’ language in Matthew 7:7-12 was paternal. In both cases the point was the same — the Lord has a loving disposition toward His children, a loving disposition that can be compared to the love a mom or dad has for children in a healthy parent/child relationship.

¹⁰ Robertson, Archibald Thomas. *Word Pictures in the New Testament: Matthew and Mark*. (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1930), 7.

¹¹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 16.

Though not all earthly parents live up to God's ideal, most can still understand the point of Scripture. The Lord is kind and gracious towards His people. Because of these things, all should have confidence in approaching the Lord in prayer.

The Will of God – The Golden Caveat

There is an important caveat to consider when speaking of these things. The Lord's promise to answer prayer is not a guarantee that He will answer any prayer. He can never grant a request that goes against His character or His will. Such a reality may seem like a disappointment to some. Au contraire, such truth is of glorious good for our souls. It promises us that the Lord will never grant us something that would be a detriment to us in any way. In addition, it tells us that the Lord will not withhold any good thing from those who ask. Scripture says, "This is the confidence we have before him: If we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears whatever we ask, we know that we have what we have asked of him" (1 John 5:14-15).

Conclusion – Seeking God through Prayer

Concerning God's readiness to respond to our prayers, Charles Spurgeon once said, "God does answer prayer. We are as sure of this as we are that we breathe."¹² As we talk about the pursuit of God through a study of the word "seek" in Scripture, it is critical to consider the role of prayer in seeking the Lord. Prayer is one of the foremost means given to us for drawing near to God. As we pray in order to pursue Him, may we remember to persevere and expect Him to answer prayers that are in alignment with His will.

¹² Spurgeon, C.H. (1834-92). The Man Whose Name was Help. *The Banner of Truth Magazine: July 2017*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2017), 15-16.