

“Persist in Pursuing God”

Matthew 7:7-11

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Nothing takes the place of perseverance—not talent, not luck, not brains. That’s true in our work, our relationships, and in our spiritual life, too. We have to persist in pursuing God.

Two weeks ago, we talked about how we should be discerning between good and evil, true and false, but we shouldn’t put down or look down on other people. Another way of saying it is, we should *judge* but we shouldn’t be *judgmental*. Being judgmental hurts others, and it destroys community.

In today’s passage, Jesus invites us to turn from hurtful habits to positive ones, to being productive in prayer. Our prayer life is connected with our attitude toward others, because it’s hard to stay angry or judgmental toward others when we’re praying for them. That’s why Jesus has told us to pray for our enemies.

If we are going to be able to tell what’s true and what’s false, what’s good and what’s not, we need God’s help. We need to stay connected in prayer.

Jesus has already taught about prayer in the Sermon on the Mount, and that’s where we learned we’re supposed to avoid praying for show. He teaches we should make God’s glory our first priority in prayer. Here he makes a different point.

First, prayer is an expression of a living relationship with God (v. 7)

Jesus is talking about a continuing action. He’s encouraging us to hang in there with prayer. You could extend this to all the areas of the Christian life. We have to persevere in prayer, we have to persevere in studying our Bible, and we have to persevere in sharing the good news about Jesus with others. That’s why Paul says in Galatians 6, “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.” (Galatians 6:9)

I don’t think Jesus’ point is stamina for its own sake. He already told us in Matthew chapter 6 that we don’t have to keep piling on words before God hears us. The point is that we be in a living relationship with the Father. You talk with someone more than once about something that matters to you, don’t you? If we know God and love him, it’s natural that we continually bring our needs and fears and joys to him.

Second, we have an encouraging promise (v. 8)

He’s talking to his followers, and he says “everyone who seeks finds.” That’s good news. Then he reinforces it six times: the one who asks will receive; the one who knocks will have the door opened.

The book of James promises God loves to do:

If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. (James 1:5-8)

And the apostle John said it wonderfully:

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.
(1 John 5:14-15)

Jesus wants so much for us to be secure in God's care for us that he practically begs us to bring our needs to him. He's giving us a gift of sheer encouragement, because he promises us he will be there for us, no matter what our circumstances.

Third, we can count on our Father's compassion. (9-11)

Jesus' words about us being evil might surprise us as he uses the argument, "If A, then how much more B." But his point is not that we are evil creatures. His point isn't to put us down.

Now, I don't mean to downplay the problem of human sin. In our Calvinist tradition, we take the problem of human sin seriously. But Jesus isn't trying to put us in our place, here. He's simply making clear that even we sinful human beings love our own children, imperfect though we are. Who wouldn't have a heart for their own children, Jesus asks. When they ask for bread, we wouldn't dream of giving them a rock and saying, "Here, chew on this." Or they might ask for some fish to eat, and we wouldn't dream of giving something disgusting or dangerous instead. His point is, you know how to take care of your kids. Don't you think God knows how to take care of his?

Okay, maybe you're thinking, I'd like that to be true, but what do you base that on? I'd like to trust God to be a compassionate Father, but what about the times we don't deserve it? There's a parallel to this passage in the Gospel of Luke, and it includes a little parable that helps us better understand. He writes,

Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, "Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him."

Then the one inside answers, "Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything."

I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs. (Luke 11:5-8)

It's worth unpacking the story a little for the way it sheds light on Jesus' teaching on persistence. Let me set the stage.

I've shared with you before that in Jesus' culture, the most important values were hospitality, and avoiding shame. That's the background for the little parable. Let's look at the action:

Someone shows up at your house at midnight, wanting help for a journey. You don't have anything to give him to eat, and the stores are closed. What's the problem with that? If you don't provide hospitality, then not only you, but also the whole village will be marked as social failures. You'll bring shame on yourself and your village if you let that happen, so you desperately run to your next-door neighbor to borrow some bread.

Is your neighbor then going to send you away without help? Of course not! The reputation of the village is at stake. To send you away empty handed would be a breach of hospitality—your neighbor's not going to offer a lame excuse like, "Sorry, I'm already in bed!" If he does that, the word's going to get out—after all, you're pounding on his door and shouting at midnight—that he doesn't know how to take care of a guest, and he's going to be shamed. His reputation's going to suffer.

It's the same in the story of the exodus from Egypt. After the people worship the Golden Calf, God says he's going to destroy them for their unfaithfulness. Moses pleads with God, and says, "But what are the Egyptians going to think? That you led them out of slavery just to kill them?" (Genesis 32:11-12) And God was true to his character, even though the people were not, and he relented from punishment. That's why Paul writes to Timothy,

If we are faithless,
He will remain faithful,
For he cannot disown himself. (2 Timothy 2:13)

Our perseverance in prayer is connected to God's character. It's not that God is reluctant, and he finally caves in because we keep bugging him. He meets our needs when we ask because he's not willing to be shamed. It we can count on God because his response to us isn't dependent on how well we're doing, but on the fact he is faithful. That's why the prophet Daniel prayed,

"Give ear, O God, and hear; you're your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your Name. We do not make requests of you because we are righteousness, but because of your great mercy" (Daniel 9:18).

God says, "My reputation is at stake, it's about my character, and I'm going to come through for you." So Jesus practically *begs* us to ask come to him in prayer. God is defined by the promises he makes, and the promises he keeps.

What are we supposed to ask for? Everything we need! I don't know about you, but I used to think, "Rats, I wish God could be more generous, and give what I want sometimes, and not just the bare minimum." But that's the point. Like it says in Psalm 37,

Delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.
(Psalm 37:4)

He's not stingy. The point is, he knows what I need, really need, better than I do, to be a happy, productive Christian. What I know is so limited, so clouded. That's why I'm happy he doesn't always give me what I want. I can count on him to give what I really need in his perfect wisdom.

The Father wants to give good gifts, or like Luke's version has it, "How much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?" (Luke 11:13) That's really saying the same thing, because the Holy Spirit is the source of all good things. God's saying, "I'll give you myself. Nothing else will ultimately make you happy."

So there's no such thing as unanswered prayer for the Christ-follower. Jesus says, "Everyone who asks receives." God always hears our prayers. That's why he will never ignore us, and it's why he will never answer us in a way that hurts us. He might not make us rich or famous, but so what? He always gives exactly what we need for our ultimate happiness.

We should be glad that God reserves the right to substitute something else for our request.

Maybe you've heard the acrostic, ACTS, for a way to pray. Let me just remind us of it. After all, we can ask God for what we need, but prayer is so much bigger than that.

ADORATION This is a good place to start, because it's praising God for who he is. He's a great big God, and he's in charge of everything, so sometimes it gets our heads on straight to simply come into his presence in worship.

CONFESSION When we sense how great God is, we're humbled. We see we need to come clean, and that happens when we simply agree with Him about our need for forgiveness.

THANKSGIVING When we experience God's forgiveness and new life, we're moved to say thanks. A great way to do this is to just count your blessings. Make a list of twenty things you're grateful for—it's a good place to start.

SUPPLICATION This is simply asking Him for what we need. Jesus tells us to do this, and he's always ready to hear us.

God told the prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament,

I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask for me; I was ready to be found by those do not seek me. I said, "I am here, I am here," to a nation tat did not call on my name. (Isaiah 65:1)

And James wrote to the church,

You do not have, because you do not ask. (James 4:2)

That's good reason to pray. When we trust in Jesus, we become his sons and daughters by faith. God is our Father, and he cares for us intimately and infinitely. Nothing we need is insignificant to him.