

Sermon Title: Be New
Biblical Text: Matthew 7:7-14
Teaching Series: Kingdom Being
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Matthew 7:7-14

“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! So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets. Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”

As we continue to consider Jesus’ *Sermon on the Mount*, we return to the theme of prayer. Earlier in his address, Jesus gives his disciples instructions about *how* and *what* to pray. If you remember, he told them instead of praying to be heard and seen by others, they ought to pray in solitude and with humility to their Heavenly

Father ... *who is in secret* (6:6). That's the *how*. And then he says, *pray then like this* and lays out the Lord's Prayer (6:9). That's the *what*.

Today, in vv.7-14 Jesus returns to prayer to explain *why* we should pray.

Now for some of us we pray out of habit. Before meals or bedtime perhaps ... or during a worship gathering, and so on. Prayer is a part of our lives. Others of us pray because we've seen it transform our situation or bring healing and help to those around us. Prayer works. Others still don't see much cosmic reason for prayer and our participation is plagued with skepticism and doubt, but it's calming and comforting and has positive personal benefits. Prayer feels good.

So, we pray because it's part of our lives (but often not meaningful) ... or because it's effective (but just as often its not, at least not that we can see) ... or perhaps because it's personally beneficial (but it's has little effect beyond that). Regardless of our preconceived notions of prayer or habits of prayer or previous experience, I think Jesus speaks to all of us today. Amidst all our reasons and tensions within prayer ... Jesus gives us a singular focus in our prayer life: he directs our attention to the Heavenly Father. That's the primary reason for prayer. Prayer is all about the Heaven Father. That's what I'd like to talk about today. I want to talk about why prayer is all about the Heavenly Father. I want to talk about the fact that when we understand that, the habit of prayer takes on new meaning, the effectiveness of prayer becomes multilayered, and the personal benefit go beyond our feelings to our healing and participating with God in the renewal of all things.

Again, we'll consider this by directing our attention to the Heavenly Father as Jesus is describing him. Here's how we'll organize our time ...

- Prayer is about the Father's *will*.
- Prayer is about the Father's *character*.
- Prayer is about the Father's *story*.

[Prayer]

Movement 1: Prayer is About the Father's Will

(vv.7-8, John 14:13-14;15:7;16:23-24)

Jesus begins this portion of his instruction on prayer with a thrilling promise. Look at vv.7-8. *Read Matthew 7:7-8 ... 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.* Ask, *you'll receive.* Seek, *you'll find.* Knock, *it'll open.* Now, this sounds really awesome ... but also, way too simple. *Right?* Or, worse ... incredibly misleading. After all, who among us hasn't asked God for something and still not received it? Or have sought something from the Lord and not found it yet? Or knocked on so many doors that are still closed? In fact, all we have to do is open to nearly any narrative in the Bible and we'll find God's people asking, seeking, and knocking

without satisfaction. So ... if Jesus' words can be so easily debunk, then surely his words have a different meaning. So, *what exactly is Jesus promising?*

To answer that it's helpful to review a couple passage where Jesus says something very similar. He seems particularly committed to communicating this ideas in what's called his *Farewell Discourse*—a series of lessons he delivers to his disciples after instituting the Lord's Supper, the night before he dies on the cross.

Which, seems like a really good time to teach about prayer. The *Farewell Discourse* is found in John's gospel account, chapters 14-17. So, please meet me in John 14:13 ...

- ***Read John 14:13-14 ... Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.***
- ***Read John 15:7-8 ... If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.***
- ***Read John 15:16 ... You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.***

- ***Read John 16:23 ... In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you.***

Now, *do you see? What exactly is Jesus promising?* The promise of prayer comes with a caveat or condition. Jesus says if you pray ... *in accordance with the will of the Father* or as he says, *in my name* ... then, and only then, whatever you ask will be given, whatever is sought will be found, whatever door is knocked will be opened. *You see? Prayer is all about the Father's will.* Now, this should be really encouraging. We should be elated that whatever the Creator of the universe, whatever the Heavenly Father, whatever our omnipotent and all-knowing God desires and plans and determines will come to pass. It *should* be ...

However, let's just be real ... not only is this not initially comforting to many of us, it's deeply troubling. Let's think about this. Ancient culture esteemed a personal will which was surrendered to and for the good of the will or honor of the family or community. Modern culture, though, esteems the unadulterated and unhindered personal will. This is the predominate identity narrative we're daily told through songs and movies and advertisement. For example ... I can't think of a single storyline of a popular media which espouses the idea that you become your best self when you obey your parents. Parents are almost always being educated and enlightened by their children about freedom, expression, and personhood. This is why we have a hard time with this idea of prayer. Prayer is about surrendering our will to the will of another. Namely, the Heavenly Father.

I've been working through Thomas à Kempis' book, *The Imitation of Christ* for the past year or so in my morning reading. He was a fifteenth-century clergyman and writer. And just this week I came across a prayer and a reflection of his which perfectly captures the heart of what Jesus is instructing his disciples and why it's so hard ...

Lord, if it be Your will, be it done as I ask, and if it be to Your praise, let it be fulfilled in Your Name. And if you see that it is good and profitable to me, give me grace to use it to Your honor; if You know it to be hurtful to me, and not profitable to the health of my soul, then take away from me such desire.

Not every desire comes from the Holy Spirit, though it seem right and just. It is sometimes quite hard to judge whether a good or an evil spirit moves you to this or to that, or whether you are moved by your own spirit. Many are deceived in the end, who first appeared to have been moved by the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, with fear of God and with humility of heart, you should desire and ask whatever comes into your mind to be desired and asked. And with a complete forsaking of yourself, commit all things to God and say: Lord, You know what is most profitable to me; do this or that according to your will. Give me what You will, as much as You will, and when You will. Do

with me as You know what is best to be done, as it shall please You, and as it shall be most to Your honor. Put me where You will, and freely do with me in all things according to Your will. I am Your creature, and in Your hands; lead me and turn me where You will. Lo, I am Your servant, ready to do all things that You command, for I do not desire to live to myself, but to You. Would to God that I might live worthily and profitably, and to Your honor.

The Imitation of Christ, 126-127

I think you would agree that à Kempis seems to view prayer not as the place where we make our will known to God or where we wait for him to affirm our self-constructed identity and plans. Rather, he sees prayer as the place where we ask for our will and identity and desires to be conformed or surrendered to that of the Heavenly Father. Where we ask for his will to be done ... where we seek for his purposes to be realized ... where we knock on doors for the sake of his name. Now you might say, well, *I don't know the Father's will?* On our own, none of us do. Surely, he's given us his Word, his Spirit, and his people, all for the express purpose of showing us his will. But learning the will of God is also one of the primary reason we go to the Father in prayer. Prayer teaches us the will of God.

So, *why should we pray?*

To be centered upon the Father's plans and purposes and process.

Prayer is about the Father's *will*.

Movement 2: Prayer is About the Father's Character

(vv.10-11, Jeremiah 29:10-11,12-14, Romans 12:2)

Being conformed to the Father's will is not the only reason for prayer. We're not simply meant to get behind his plans and purposes and process through prayer.

After all, being conformed to the will of another isn't virtuous in and of itself. The virtue of our surrender is predicated upon the character of that person, the character of the Heavenly Father. To give over our will to someone who is evil or even just incompetent is harmful and crushing. But to give our will over to the one who is good is nourishing and liberating. You see, in prayer we're not simply shaped by the plans of the Father, but by his love.

This is what sets the Heavenly Father apart—his character. The prophet Jeremiah understood this. He spoke to a people who were entrenched in another cultural, underneath the oppressive rule of a government, power, and religious disposition which were in stark opposition to the God of the Bible. And Jeremiah delivers to them a divine message: *Read Jeremiah 29:10-11 ... "For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope."* Now, many evangelical Christians who are steeped in the modern cultural identity narrative we spoke about previously, love this verse. I mean, love this verse. *Why?* Well, because it sounds like it's about them. It sounds like it's

about me ... and our prosperity and flourishing and the good life we're all asking, seeking, and knocking for ... *right*? But while that is certainly in there, the controlling portion of the message is ... *what*? God. It's all about the Heavenly Father. He says to his enslaved people, *I will visit you ... I will fulfill my promise ... I know the plans I have for you ... Are you with me?* This is all about the **character** of the Father. His love and faithfulness and protection and glory. It's all about ability and integrity to do what he says he will do. As Paul puts it in Romans 12, ***Read Romans 12:2 ... Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*** The will of the Father reveals the character of the Father. His will is good because he is good. He is acceptable or pleasing. He is perfect. In other words, to be conformed to his will is to shaped in his likeness ... it's to discover who you really are.

This too cuts against the grain of the stories of our society. Pastor Tim Keller explains that the only heroic narrative left is looking into your heart and deciding who you are and who you want to be and then not allowing anyone or anything to tell you any different. *Right?* That's why, my brothers and sisters, we fear surrendering to the will and character of the Father through prayer. I fear that if I surrender over to him, then I will lose myself. I wonder if that's what we all fear. We fear if we surrender to the Father ...

We won't succeed at work.

We won't enjoy sex.

We won't own our sexuality.

We won't buy what we want to possess.

We won't go where we want to go.

We won't be seen how we want to be seen.

We won't receive what we're asking.

We won't find what we're seeking.

We won't get doors opened we're knocking.

We won't be who we want to be.

Because of this cultural narrative that controls so much of how we think ... we see the will and character of the Heavenly Father for what it takes from us. What it costs. What it steals. And that's terrifying. You see, we've looked within ourselves and determined what is good and acceptable and perfect to us. We've written our own, or at least we trying to write our own heroic narratives. And anything less is not simply contrary, we even call it a violence or a violation of personhood.

This is why, like Jeremiah, Jesus gives us a clear picture of the character of God.

Check out v.9. ***Read Matthew 7:9-11 ... 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 using another one of those *a fortiori* arguments. Moving from the lesser to the greater. He says, ***“how much more.”*** He compares the love of an

imperfect and even sinful earthly parent with the perfect and sinless Heavenly Father's love. But Jesus is saying more than that ...

Notice, in Jesus' short parable the child asks for something that is basic for survival and nourishment (bread and a fish). And he juxtaposes those necessary things with things that will cause harm and even kill the child (a stone and a snake). *What's Jesus saying? Well, contrary to the cultural narrative, the Heavenly Father's will is not for our demise.* The Father's will is not to take and cost and steal from us. The Father's will is not intent on crushing your personhood. *How do we know that? Because, how much more?! Because prayer reminds us of the character of our Heavenly Father ... he loves us ... he provides us ... he takes care of us ... he wants us to have what we need more than we do.* The Father's will is for our survival and nourishment and good. His will is good because he is good.

Why should we pray?

To be grow in our trust and love of the Father.

Prayer is about the Father's *character*.

Movement 3: Prayer is About the Father's Story

(vv.12-14, Galatians 2:20)

Now, it's worth revisiting why surrender feels like death. It feels cruel and contrary to modern convention. However, what Jesus is teaching us is that though surrender begins with death ... it's a death that leads to new life. That's what we consider

next. From his will and his character, Jesus moves us to what I'll simply call the Father's *story*.

All of history—from eternity past on into eternity future—God is telling a story. Many of the details of that story are laid out in the *Sermon on the Mount*. It's not just a list of things to do and say. If you remember back in chapter 5, Jesus said he came to fulfill the Law and the Prophet. He came to fulfill the promises of God. That's the story. He laid out the exposition ... rise in action ... and climax of the story in first covenant. And when things began to fall apart—the fall in action—we began to long for a resolution. Jesus is saying he himself is that resolution. And yet part of God's promise and story is meant to be fulfilled in us. It's summarized in a similar way here in v.12. ***Read Matthew 7:12 ... “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”***

The Law and the Prophets is short-hand for the Old Testament or the first covenant. The first part of the story. In other words, what's popularly known as the Golden Rule, is an anchor for all the Bible's moral teaching. If we are always treating others the way we'd like to be treated, we'll be obeying all of the other laws.

But this requires a kind of death, *doesn't it?* Because it's putting another in the center of our consider. It's decentering ourselves. Namely because it's a positive command. It's an active instruction. Much has been made about how so many other faiths and religions have a similar central command to the Golden Rule. Bahai Faith, Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, and others have a nearly identical teaching. The one compelling distinction is that all these are

phrased as negative or passive command. Like, ***Do not do to others ...*** Now this may seem minor. But it's instructive in the story the Father is telling. To be proactive in our treatment of others is a direct result of the Father's proactive treatment of us. He doesn't simply not harm us. He doesn't simply not give us rocks and snakes. But he heals us. He helps us. He answers us. He gives us bread and fish. You see, we only take on this posture toward our neighbors when we lay aside our will and our cultural narrative of self, we die and become someone new ... someone like our Father. That's the story.

Why should we pray?

To be shaped by the truth and beauty of the Father's vision and design of history and the world, not the fantasy and self-centered version of our own.

We should believe the Father's ***story***.

In Galatians Paul summarizes this "dying to self" this way, ***Read Galatians 2:20 ...***

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

This is the story the Father is telling. This is the story we're learning every time we come to prayer. When we speak to the Father ... we are laying down our will ... we are stripping away our character ... we are leaving our story ... and we are taking on the will, character, and story of the Heavenly Father.

This is hard. This is uncommon. Prayer, like the Christian life as a whole, takes us down a lonely road. Jesus dignifies the struggle as he concludes this portion of his sermon. *Read Matthew 7:13-14 ... "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few."* Now, much can be said about this text. Suffice for our time, the wide gate and the easy way is the way of self. And in our sin, we've all chosen this pathway. We've chosen the path of the many. We've built lives asking, seeking, and knocking for things which achieve our will. And, you see? That pathway leads to destruction. Only Jesus chose the narrow gate of the Father's *will* and walked the hard road of the Father's *character* and embraced the full life of the Father's *story*. And yet, the invitation stands. Notice, Jesus says "enter ..." Or come ... join me. This is the hope of the gospel. We can enter a different gate, we can walk a different way than we started. Though by sin we are on a path of destruction, Jesus invites us to die to the narrative of self today, this moment and come to life in the will, character, and story of the Father. While in some respects this is a one time event. It's also the daily path of discipleship for followers of Jesus. A daily path walked, often, through prayer.

Whose will are you seeking? Whose character are you embodying? Whose story are you telling?

In Christ, prayer realigns and restores us to our Heavenly Father. Because prayer is all about him.