

Pastor Don Nelson

Sermon: May 3, 2015
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“ASK, SEEK, KNOCK”
Matthew 7:7-12

☑ **“Prayer changes things.”**

We have prayed for the jobless and God has provided work. We have prayed for the sick and God has healed them. We have prayed for those who are troubled and God has transformed them. **“I love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy”** (Psalm 116:1).

“Prayer changes things” – except when it doesn’t.

We have interceded for troubled marriages which afterwards ended in divorce. We have pleaded for alcoholics who are still self-destructing. We have sought healing for cancer victims who have since died. **“My God, my God...why are you so far from the words of my groaning?...I cry out, but you do not answer”** (Ps 22:1).

James 4:2 says: **“You...do not have... because you do not ask God.”** But I’m not talking about un-prayed prayers; I am talking about persistent believers faithfully bringing the same petitions for years, often with sighs and tears, and yet their pleas are not granted.

James 4:3 adds: **“When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.”** Except that is not what I have in mind; I’m thinking of appeals for an atheist to come to Jesus, or for peace and justice – appeals that bear no fruit.

Proverbs 15:29 states that although **“the LORD hears the prayer of the righteous”** he **“is far from the wicked.”** Only I’m not talking about **“the wicked”**; I am speaking of disciples in whom Christ’s light shines brightly, but whose petitions make no difference.

☐ **“Prayer changes things”** -- except when it doesn’t. Do you ever feel discouraged about this? Do you ever wonder if prayer is worth the cost in time, energy, and hope? Are you ever tempted to quit?

☑ Please turn with me to Matthew 7:7-12.

■ In verses 7-8 Messiah proclaims: **“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; those who seek find; and to those who knock, the door will be opened.”**

It sounds so cut-and-dried. No wonder some people claim this as an ironclad guarantee that God will fulfill every request. Pray and it will happen – automatically, unconditionally, inevitably!

They are mistaken. Not only does human experience cast doubts on their contention, the biblical record itself proves them wrong.

{2 Co 12:8-9} The apostle Paul was a spiritual giant if ever there was one. He **“pleaded with the Lord”** **“three times”** to remove the **“thorn in [his] flesh,”** but healing was not given. He sought relief from an ailment that tormented him, but he did not find it.

{Heb 5:7; Mt 26:39; Lk 22:44} In Gethsemane, God the Son **“offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears”**: **“If it is possible, may this cup be taken from me.”** He beseeched his Father three

times, so “**earnestly**” that “**his sweat was like drops of blood**” – yet he did not receive what he asked for.

{Mt 26:39} Granted, he ended his petition with the phrase, “**not as I will, but as you will.**” Still, does anyone think the Father would have rescued him from the cross if only he had not uttered those fateful words?

{Heb 5:7} Hebrews reminds us that the Father **did “save [his Son] from death”** by raising him from the grave. But surely resurrection is not what Jesus had in mind when he begged not to have to drink “**this cup.**”

✎ As much as our text sounds like a guarantee of wish fulfillment, it isn’t. It is an invitation to draw near to God, framed in three active verbs.

Messiah begins with “**Ask.**” Everyone has valid needs and legitimate desires.

Notice my use of adjective “legitimate.” Who instilled within us our most potent desires? Not the devil, not the world – the Creator.

The problem is that ever since the man and woman ate the forbidden fruit, our impulse is to ask the wrong things to fulfill us. Many of those things are, in and of themselves, excellent or potentially good; yet the delights they bring are limited and temporary. They were not designed to give ultimate fulfillment.

That is found in YHWH alone. Bring your needs and desires *to him*. “**Ask**” *him*.

Messiah continues with “**Seek.**” Everyone is seeking answers to the deep questions regarding human origins, purpose, journey, and destination.

The problem is that we tend to look for Truth in autonomous science, philosophy, religion, and art. The key word is “autonomous.” God endows us with intelligence and creativity for our enlightenment and edification. Consequently, any movement that is anti-intellectual or anti-creative has no place in the Church.

However, exercised without reference to God science, philosophy, religion, and art end in confusion. Apart from him, they do not lead to ultimate answers.

Those are found in YHWH alone. Bring your questions to *him*. “**Seek**” *him*.

Messiah concludes with “**Knock.**” Everyone hungers for abundant, eternal life.

The problem is, we are prone to knock on doors of power and fame, of materialism, sensuality, beauty, and fitness, of traditionalism, ritualism, and legalism. Jeremiah 2:13 speaks to this: “**My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.**”

They are the wrong doors. They don’t open to life.

That is found in YHWH alone. Go *to him*. “**Knock**” *on his door*.

★ “**Ask,**” “**seek,**” and “**Knock**” are in the imperative mood, the present tense, and the active voice. That combination indicates continuously repeated actions: *keep* on asking, *keep* on seeking, and *keep* on knocking.

★ Also, asking, seeking, and knocking are primarily a way to connect with God, and secondarily a means of getting answers. Regardless how the LORD answers a specific request he himself is the greatest fulfillment, the truest answer, and the best door.

■ He often says “Yes”. Verses 9-11 emphasize his generosity: **“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!”** Even when he says “No” asking, seeking, and knocking create space to meet with him.

Prayer does not always change things. It does connect us with the Living God, and that changes us.

■ Finally, verse 12: **“So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.”**

This only *sounds* off-point. Asking, seeking and knocking are a means of drawing near to God – and Jesus consistently teaches that our relationship with God is inseparable from our relationships with people.

? So if I habitually ask, seek, and knock only for myself, am I connecting with God? After all, in Matthew 5:44 Messiah commands us to **“Love [our] enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”** Here in verse 12 he is prompting us to pursue intimacy with his Father that is inclusive and other-centered.

Doing so is no guarantee that God will fulfill all our requests. It will unite us more closely to him.

Prayer changes things, except when it doesn't. To those who are discouraged, doubtful, or tempted, Christ Jesus says: **“Ask...seek and...knock.”**

Matthew 7:7-12 is the Word of the Lord.