

Sermon Notes of Rev Dr Ivor J.W.Oakley (10-9-2000 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

**Matthew 7 v 7-11**

Additional Reading Luke 11 v 1-13

**Ask, Seek, Knock**

Introduction

This text is one of the well-known statements of the Lord about prayer, containing a most gracious and comprehensive promise. Life is full of uncertainties, but here is something which is certain, absolute and dependable. It occurs twice in the Gospels, here in Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount, and in Luke during the Lord's teaching about prayer in answer to his disciple's request, near the Lord's Prayer.

We noted earlier, differences between accounts of Matthew and Luke about the Lord's Prayer. Luke's was shorter (as seen in NIV where older manuscripts, not known in 1611, were being used.) The parable of Luke 11:5-8, which is used to strengthen the Lord's argument, is not in Matthew at all. Instead of the Father in heaven giving **good gifts to those who ask him** (Matthew 7:11), Luke has him giving **the Holy Spirit to those who ask him** (Luke 11:13). No doubt the Lord said both many times, and both are true.

We are going to consider this gracious promise about prayer, but will be concentrating on only one aspect of answered prayer. Need to see this against wider background of biblical teaching on prayer. For example, we are taught elsewhere there must be nothing between us and the Lord, because if we cherish iniquity, the Lord will not hear. Also there must be an earnestness about the prayer life. Must ask in complete confidence and faith that what God has promised, he is able to perform, and he only gives us what is in his will. **If we ask anything according to his will, he hears us** (1 John 5:14).

We must remember these things because prayer is not just a matter of asking for the first thing which comes into our head to please and satisfy, and expecting an immediate answer. We cannot pray effectively regardless of our spiritual condition. There are conditions laid down, and above all else it is God who will answer according to his will, when and where is best. His answer will be for his glory, not our comfort and self-importance.

Command which Jesus gives

**Ask... seek... knock** (Matthew 7:7). In Greek there are two ways of commanding: (a) once for all, as in **Put your sword away** (John 18:11), Aorist Imperatives βαλε; (b) present imperative, as in **[Keep on] being filled with the Spirit** (Ephesians 5:18) πληρουσθε. Here it is the present imperative that is being used αιτειτε, ζητειτε, κρουετε. Furthermore it suggests growing intensity. If a child wants mother when she is near and visible, he asks; if the mother is neither near nor visible, he seeks; if she is inaccessible in her room, he knocks. In Luke's account, he tells the parable of the man who gets up at midnight. He speaks of the man's

persistence and boldness *αυαδειον*. There are many other examples. **They should always pray and not give up** (Luke 18:1). Think of the Lord in Gethsemane, praying the same thing three times. Think of the time when Peter was in prison **The church was earnestly praying (without ceasing AV) to God for him** (Acts 12:5). Epaphras **who is always wrestling in prayer for you** (Colossians 4:12).

So the condition laid down here is to persist, persevere, continue to do something, not give up if no immediate answer. We have to be persistent, not because God is unwilling or so reluctant that he has to be badgered, but as a test of our sincerity and reality. Many of our prayers are mere passing desires, correct but empty statements, matter of fact comments. Persistence is proof of our earnest and confidence in God. It shows that we really want these things. Persistence means certain changes in us. Not imposing our will on God, but aligning ourselves with his will. He waits till we desire his will in the matter. Persistence gradually purifies our motives and deepens our desires. Sometimes God's answer is delayed because other changes need to take place in our situation or that of others.

Bishop Hanley Moule's book "Secret Prayer" tells of a devoted Sunday School teacher who was the means of bringing scholar after scholar with growing frequency to the feet of Jesus, followed by new life of love and consistency. After her death, her simple diary was found, containing the three following resolutions: (1) resolved to pray for each scholar by name; (2) resolved to wrestle in prayer for each scholar by name; (3) resolved to wrestle in prayer for each scholar by name, and to expect an answer.

George Muller, once he was sure God had a purpose of blessing for someone and in his will for him to pray, continues year after year. Prayed for one man every day for 63 years 8 months. The man was still unconverted at the time of Muller's death, but came to the Lord before Muller's funeral.

We must keep on. Cannot come too often to the Lord in prayer. We can never weary God. He never tires of hearing us.

With each command comes a promise. If we ask, we will receive; if we seek, we will find; if we knock, the door will be opened. Everyone is promised this. There are no exceptions, no restrictions. God will answer. The time and the manner are in his hands. Leave it with him. It may be "no", or "not yet", if he has something better for us. But there will be an answer. It may not be what we desire or expect. It may not come till after we are dead. For example, John Newton's godly mother prayed for her son, but died when he was 7. Things got far worse over the years before they got better, but eventually he was saved.

Even when refused, it will be an answer of love and wisdom of God. In ignorance we often ask for things which would be our ruin. Often we look back and thank God he did not give us what we wanted or at the time when we wanted it. Martin Lloyd Jones says "I thank God that he is not prepared to do anything I may chance to ask him.... I am profoundly grateful that he did not grant me certain things for which I asked, and that he shut doors in my face". But an answer will come and it will glorify God and demonstrate his perfect love and wisdom, and it will be the best for us in long run, though we may not think so at the time.

### Argument which Jesus uses

Jesus uses this argument to encourage prayer and strengthen resolve. He assures us of God's goodness and goodwill towards us, and that he is not going to mock us. He is better than the best father. Therefore he gives us good things if we ask him. Argues from human fatherhood to divine fatherhood. From lesser to greater. **If son asks for bread, will give him a stone...if asks for a fish, will give him a snake** (Matthew 7:9-10). The two things Jesus uses in each comparison have close resemblance in appearance in Palestinian setting. Then Jesus strengthens his case still further – **If you, then, though you are evil** (Note how he assumes human race is fallen and sinful with our twisted nature and bias to evil and total depravity) **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 7:11). If we in sin are kind to children, how much more will God give good things to those who keep on asking τοῖς αἰτουσιν αὐτον. If you, despite the person you are, do not give shabby substitute, do not play mean trick on someone you love, how much more can you be sure your loving heavenly Father is willing and able to give you the best.

What light this throws on God's character. What confidence this gives us. What strength to face the days and experiences we pass through. Life is like a journey and it is full of perplexities and problems. Like Abraham, we have to go out not knowing where we are going. Yet Abraham was perfectly happy and at rest, because although he did not know where he was going, he did know with whom he was going (said a 17<sup>th</sup> century Puritan).

The Lord does not promise to remove all our trials, but we can so know God and his love that whatever happens we need never be alarmed or frightened. He is concerned about us and is watching over us. He has plans and purposes for us which are good and gracious. He will never neglect or harm us, never allow evil or hurtful things. He never makes a mistake. So we can face each day knowing we are going to receive good things. It may not seem so to us at the time. May appear uncomfortable and annoying. But God is constantly working in our lives, maturing our character, drawing us closer to himself, wooing us from worldliness and materialism, preparing us for future service, because he sees the end from the beginning – unlike us!

To grasp this, as we face life and all that happens, transforms attitudes. It enables us to say, at every possibility and eventuality: **In all things God works for the good of those who love him** (Romans 8:28).

### Promise which Jesus makes

**Your Father in heaven gives good gifts to those who ask him** (Matthew 7:11). We are not entitled to ask for and expect anything which may come into our mind. We can be sure of getting “good things”. What are they? Obviously good things are things which God describes and sees as good. What are these good things which God wishes us to have?

Luke's account specifies the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:13). He will give the Holy Spirit in full measure that we might experience rivers of living water flowing from us. All

Christians have the Holy Spirit but not all Christians know his filling. All possess the Holy Spirit but not all are possessed *by* the Holy Spirit. He seeks to take possession of us, to pour his own life into us, giving us power for living the Christian life and for service.

What other good things – there are the matters mentioned in the latter part of the Lord's Prayer – not wealth or unclouded happiness but daily bread, forgiveness, and protection from evil. Also the good things mentioned in the Beatitudes – comfort, being filled with righteousness, seeing God, blessedness in persecution. Broaden all this into all God has promised to his people of both Old and New Testaments. Triumphant emphatic words: **For the Lord is a sun and shield: the Lord bestows favour and honour; no good things does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless** (Psalm 84:11).

### Conclusion

Keep on asking, keep on seeking and keep on knocking. Your Father in heaven is the best of fathers. If you who are evil by God's standards give good things, how much more will he. In the light of these promises, why are we what we are? Why is the quality of our Christian living so poor? We are entirely without excuse. All we need is offered us. All is promised us here in this comprehensive promise. Why are we not availing ourselves of it? Surely the answer to the problem is **You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart** (Jeremiah 29:13).