

But How? (Sermon on the Mount #15)
Matthew 7:7-12, Romans 13:8-10
May 1, 2016
Pastor Dave Carver

How does prayer work?

I mean, what do you pray for? And how do you get it?



Some folks are pretty up front about what they think ought to occupy our prayer time. Joel Osteen writes in his best-selling book, “God wants to increase you financially, by giving you promotions, fresh ideas and creativity.”¹

When Gloria Copeland was preaching to an audience in Texas, she said, “God knows where the money is, and he knows how to get the money to you.” Televangelist Jerry Savelle told the same crowd, “While everybody else is having a famine his covenant people will be having the best of times.”²

Comedian Emo Philips has a different theology. He said, “When I was a kid I used to pray every night for a new bicycle. Then I realized that the Lord doesn't work that way so I stole one and asked Him to forgive me.”³



⁴Again I'll ask, how does prayer work? And what in the world are we supposed to make of this next section in the Sermon on the Mount? If we take these verses at face value without paying attention to the context, they sure sound like God is in a hurry to give out all kinds of great stuff – like prayer is a sort of a religious home shopping network. If you're poor,

¹ *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential* (Warner, 2004), p. 5.

² “Believers Invest in the Gospel of Getting Rich”, *The New York Times* August 16, 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/16/us/16gospel.html?partner=rss&emc=rss&pagewanted=all&r=0>

³ <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/e/emophilips128947.html>

⁴ *The Sermon on the Mount*, Brian Ahn, 2012

hungry, or sick, it seems, it must be your own fault. Why didn't you ask, seek, or knock? What's wrong with you? Not enough faith?

I've known too many people who were poor, hungry, and sick whose faith put mine to shame... so I'm going to suggest that we take a look at the passage in its context and see what's really going on here.

In the first two chapters of the Sermon on the Mount, we are given a long list of seemingly impossible behaviors to master. Jesus tells his followers to let go of anger, to treat the vulnerable with respect and honor, to love the enemy, and to give generously to those who are in need, among other things. The sermon is verse after verse, point after point of what appear to be impossibly high standards.

By this point in the sermon, the disciples must have felt like throwing their hands in the air and saying, "Seriously? Come on, Jesus, how are we supposed to live like that? This is hard!"

After Jesus gives this string of amazingly high expectations, he returns to the topic of prayer. My sense is that Jesus is not urging his followers to pray for more stuff in these verses, but rather he is answering their eye-rolling, "how-in-the-world-are-we-gonna-do-this" questioning by saying, "If you're going to be a follower of mine, and do the kinds of things that I do, you're going to have to pray. A lot."

One of my pet peeves is when people treat prayer as an add-on, a bit of wishful thinking, an insignificant verbal exercise that doesn't really accomplish much. There has been more than one occasion, for instance, when I've been in the hospital praying with someone and a physician barges into the room interrupting me by saying, "All right, good, good, good, but we've got to get a move on, Pastor. We've got important things to do here." You know, as if

communication with the Lord of heaven and earth was a momentary distraction...

Many of you in this room have casually mentioned to me, “Hey, Dave, if you think of it, say a little prayer for...” And if you’ve done that, you know that my typical response is that I don’t waste my breath or my time on “little” prayers. Prayer is about reshaping me for God’s purposes in the world, and about equipping you and others to be agents of God’s presence and activity in that world. There’s nothing little about that.

And when I read these verses in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus instructs his followers to ask, seek, and knock in response to the enormity of the task that he has laid before them, well, I think that Jesus has my back. Prayer is not “little”.

I’d like you to note the escalation of a sense of urgency in the words that Jesus chooses to use. Let’s say that you’re a fourteen year-old boy outside working in the yard, and you discover that you need something that your mother can provide. The windows are open, and what do you do?



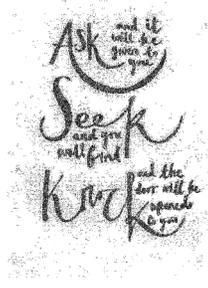
You call to her. “Mom!”, you say. “Mom!” And you name the thing that you need. In other words, you ask.

After a moment, however, you notice that nothing has changed. She has not heard you, apparently. Your need is unmet. And so you stop doing whatever important thing it is that you are doing and you walk inside the house. In other words, you seek. Your “asking” has now taken on a little more energy and concentration, hasn’t it? You may still be wailing “Mom!” (OK, let’s be honest, if you’re a typical fourteen year-old boy, you haven’t stopped shouting...), but now you’ve put legs to your questioning, haven’t you? And you’ve changed the



ways that you're interacting with the rest of the world as you do so.

But as you wander through the house, still asking, now seeking, you don't find your mother. You still need whatever it is that you needed, and so you put a little more of yourself into this exercise and you climb upstairs, where you see her bedroom door is closed. And what do you do? You knock. And in knocking, now, the equation is changed slightly because you've got to shut up for a moment and listen. Your level of expectancy changes as you wait to see how you will be answered.



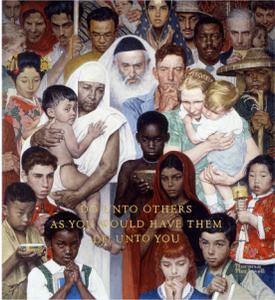
OK, I know that no analogy is perfect, and most of you are not fourteen year-old boys and your mother isn't God. But do you see what I mean about this progression or escalation? When we are faced with something as difficult as living up to the standards described in the Sermon on the Mount, our only response is to be diligent and motivated in our discipleship and prayer.

I want to be honest: if we had to engage in this level of activity or intensity at a restaurant, we'd never go to that place again. In the restaurant, the customer is always right and the wait-staff and kitchen help are at the beck and call.

But in the life of discipleship, it's not all about you. It's about you becoming the person that God made you to be so *that* the people around you will not be blown away by your anger, violated by your lust, dehumanized by your dishonesty, or marginalized by your selfishness. The Sermon on the Mount and the life of discipleship, with all apologies to Pastors Osteen, Copeland, and Savelle, is not a means by which to make us fatter, happier, richer, or better-looking.

Jesus calls his disciples, and the Spirit God is asking you, to live as Jesus does. To model the lifestyle we see in

scripture. So this passage about prayer is not about you getting more shiny stuff, as cool as that sounds. It's a strategy for you to use as you begin to look, act, and think more like Jesus each day.



⁵And then to sum it up, Jesus gives us the headline – the Golden Rule, or as the Apostle Paul put it, the “law of love”. The result of our asking, seeking, and knocking should be that we are better able to respond to situations as Jesus would; that we are more apt to hear with his ears and to share from his heart.

How does this look in real life? Well, here are some ways I've seen it active in our community.

The “Law of love” looks like a six or eight year old who says to her parents, “You know, I'm pretty sure that I have enough stuff. Can we plan a birthday party where people come to have fun, but instead of giving me more toys, they bring things for us to take to the animal shelter or money we can use to help hungry people in Africa?”

It looks like an eighteen year-old man who goes out of his way to encourage and walk with some of his classmates who are physically or mentally challenged so that they have the opportunity to experience life in fullness and joy.

When a teacher donates some of her sick days to a colleague who requires surgery, yet has already exhausted his own benefits, it looks like love in action. He is able to care for his own family while fighting cancer, and has one less thing to worry about because someone has responded with Christ-like generosity.

Look, the way of life to which Jesus calls his followers is difficult, if not downright impossible at times. If we are going

⁵ *The Golden Rule*, Norman Rockwell, 1961

to be successful in our attempts to follow him, we've got to lean into God. We've got to be hungry for what only he can offer, and we've got to stick together.

I'd like to offer my deep and sincere congratulations to the young people who are making their confirmation today. You all are ready to begin the next phase of your discipleship. I know, I know, you have completed the Confirmation Class, but you need to remember that you are just getting started in so many ways. You probably know that in other places around Pittsburgh today they're running the marathon. You probably also know that nobody got out of bed this morning and said, "You know what? I've got nothing better going on today. Maybe I'll head on into town and get in on that race." No, the marathon takes a lot of preparation and a long time to complete.

It's the same with our lives of discipleship. Making your confirmation is great. It's moving ahead with the journey that many of you began at a baptism you can't remember. But being a Christian is not about just showing up and saying, "OK, I'm here, I've got this". It's about training and running the course and getting stronger; it's about learning something more about the Jesus way every day; like the marathon, it requires growing, stretching, and even a little aching.

When we do it right, the world looks more the way God intends it to look. Welcome, confirmands. We are glad that you are with us. We need you and the gifts you bring as we share this journey.

I'll close this sermon with a benediction I've used from time to time. My wife really likes it, and I think it fits for this morning – for the young new members and for everyone else who's on the journey.

The way is long, let us go together.

The way is difficult, let us help each other.

The way is joyful, let us share it.
The way is Christ's, for Christ is the Way, let us follow.
The way is open before us, let us go:
with the love of God,
the grace of Christ, and
the communion of the Holy Spirit. Amen.