

Compelling Inducement to Pray

by J. Glyn Owen

The sermon emphasizes the importance of prayer in living the Sermon on the Mount and experiencing the presence and power of God.

Duration: 44:30

Scripture: Matthew 7:7

Topics: "Prayer Life", "The Power of Prayer", "Living Out Faith"

Description

J. Glyn Owen emphasizes the vital importance of prayer in his sermon 'Compelling Inducement to Pray,' drawing from Matthew 7:7-12. He explains that Jesus' command to ask, seek, and knock is not just a call to prayer but the key to living out the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount. Owen challenges the notion that these teachings are impractical, asserting that they become achievable through persistent prayer and reliance on God as our loving Father. He urges believers to recognize the power of prayer in their lives and the necessity of approaching God with sincerity and faith. Ultimately, Owen calls for a deeper commitment to prayer as the means to access God's blessings and fulfill the Christian calling.

Transcript

We continue this morning to meditate on the words of the Sermon on the Mount as recorded by St. Matthew, and we are turning now to chapter 7, and beginning to read with verse 7, we shall read the passage that ends with the 12th verse. Much of the same substance was heard in our earlier reading from Luke, though you will notice, I'm sure, that there are some additions there, or slight differences, the one qualifying the other. 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.

He who seeks, finds, and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you, if his 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? In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you. For this sums up the law and the prophets.

We have entitled our message this morning, Compelling Inducement to Pray, and I trust that the validity of that title will become evident before we have concluded our exposition of this passage. There are many who have read the Sermon on the Mount, and have concluded that it is purely idealistic, that it is meant to

be a kind of ideal that should profitably occupy the minds of people, something to dream about, but that it is nevertheless totally impracticable. Incapable of being obeyed and put into practice.

Now, I don't want to take time on this matter in order to prove it. There would be no real point. But it is true, to many people this morning, the Sermon on the Mount is nothing more than that.

Others, of course, have seen deeper into the reality of things. They have recognized, for one thing, the deity of the preacher. And along with the deity of the preacher, the utter integrity of his word.

And they have recognized that here our Lord Jesus Christ was really summoning his followers, the subjects of his kingdom, to live the kind of life that he here outlines. Many of those who have recognized the authority and the sincerity of the preacher have tried very hard to obey the precepts of the Sermon. Some have done well, some not so well.

Many have utterly failed. And that to which I want to refer now is this, that many have become broken-hearted in attempting. I have discovered many, many, many people, too many to count, well-intentioned, eager to serve their Lord, who have read the Sermon on the Mount and other passages of the New Testament over and over again, but I'm thinking now specifically of the Sermon on the Mount, and have wanted to know the secret of expressing these precepts in life.

But they've not been able to. And one of the main reasons why they've not been able to is that they have never seen the glory and the significance of this Word of God before us today, and they've never seen it in its real context. I have to confess myself, let preachers make confessions from time to time, but I have to confess myself that this has been true of me.

I believe I have preached on this text before, not here in Knox, but I think I have somewhere or other. But I saw it as dealing with a subject of prayer, and I came to it as if it hung in midair, a Word of God, but I never saw it until this week, here in the context in which it is found as the key to the living of the life to which Jesus calls us in the very context here in the Sermon on the Mount. And if I can do nothing else this morning, I want to ask the Lord in His grace to be merciful to us, and enable us to see that really everything hangs upon this.

And if you and I see the teaching and the summons and the ethical standards without hearing this command to come and to seek and to ask and to knock and to go on seeking, asking, knocking, because everyone who seeks is given, everyone who asks the door is open to him, and so forth. Unless we see this, that really prayer is the ultimate answer to godly living, Brothers and sisters, we have missed the most important thing in the whole of the Bible. Let's come to it.

It seems to me that the passage demands a threefold division. It begins with an almost excited announcement by Jesus of an all-encompassing promise, verses 7 and 8. It then proceeds to focus attention upon our all-excelling Heavenly Father. And this of course is basic to prayer.

Who are we praying to? What kind of a person are we praying to? And then it concludes with an all-inclusive principle, which would apparently sum up the whole of the Sermon on the Mount, and say to us in effect, in conclusion as it were, Now, this is the way forward. This one principle seems to gather up everything that's gone before it. This is the way forward, and this is the way of victory.

Let's look at at least two of these points this morning, in dependence upon the grace of the Holy Spirit. First of all, I want us to look at this all-encompassing promise. With all his now evident authority as a

teacher in matters relating to God and man, and with his equally evident sense of the unrivaled nature of the privilege he was conferring upon his followers, Jesus made this all-inclusive promise.

Ask, and it will be given you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you.

Let it be willingly conceded, of course, that we must understand such a remarkable promise in the light of what Jesus has to say elsewhere, concerning the same subject. But whatever he may say elsewhere, it does not give us license to whittle down this remarkable promise, so that it virtually means nothing. And there are many who do that, that's why I put it in that way.

As a matter of fact, this is the crucial key that Jesus puts in our hands for the successful practice of the precepts he has enunciated throughout the Sermon on the Mount. Now, look first at the extent of his promise. Ask, and it will be given you.

Now, he's not mentioning them by name, he's talking to all the subjects of his kingdom. And his terms are so couched that they apply to the subjects of his kingdom in any age, in every age, in every clime, at any time. He's not simply addressing the apostles, there's a larger company even here.

But he is fundamentally addressing the subjects of his kingdom, his followers, his disciples. Ask, he says, and it will be given you. Seek, and you will find.

Knock, and the door will be opened to you. And then, as if that were not clear enough, listen to this. For every one who asks, receives.

He who seeks, finds. To him who knocks, the door will be opened. No one seems to be necessarily barred from there.

It's as wide, it is as extensive as the kingdom of God is extensive. It is as inclusive as the kingdom of God is inclusive. And if you claim this morning to own Jesus Christ as your Lord and your Saviour, brother and sister, these are words of God, from God, through his Son, to you and to me.

But you say, they can't be true, because I have asked and I have not received. Well now, this raises many questions, practical questions. But this is the promise.

And I have to ask myself, and I bid you ask yourself, if we say that we have asked and sought and knocked and got no answer, who has been at fault? Has it been the petitioner? Or has it been the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? You see, the fact of the matter is this, that so much of our so-called praying is no praying at all. And so much of our so-called praying is not really prayer to the Father Almighty, through His co-equal Son, in the power of His Holy Spirit, and according to the promises of His Word. So much of our praying is just sheer, fanciful talking about things, informing God of things that we deem He apparently doesn't know about.

But God knows a few things. Ask, said Jesus, and it will be given you. Seek, and you will find.

Knock, and it will be opened to you. Now I pass from the extensiveness of it, but I hope sufficient has been said, even to this point, to bring home the fact that you and I are included, if you're a disciple of Christ this morning. And if you and I have not discovered this to be true, now that is an area that we've got to look into.

Something's gone wrong somewhere. And if something has gone wrong, and this is not working in our lives, we ought for God's own glory and our eternal good, seek into things, and find out what, and why, and where. You see, it's so much easier to look for some sort of experience of this kind or another, and then come back gloating about some experience of this, of that, or the other, rather than work out this principle, and let God show us why it is that He is not real to us.

Because the fact of the matter is this, you see, if this is not true, and if it's not being made true in our lives, the probability is that God is not real to us. And our religion may have God in it as an article of doctrine, but not as a fact of experience. And this is one of the great tragedies of so much religion in every age, that God may be in it as a point of doctrine, a point of reference, but not as a fact of experience.

Jesus says, ask and you'll receive. Either He's right, or He's wrong. Either He's true, or He's false.

And I rather believe that He is true, even though it indicts me of lethargy, of sin, of whatever, and tells me that my prayer life is but an excuse of praying, or something short of what it ought to be. Now let's move from the extent of our Lord's promise to the content of it. Let's come in more specifically and examine the content.

Truly these words would carry weight, as we have suggested already, even if we were to take them out of their context. They're remarkable, they comprise a remarkable utterance. But here in the context, in the Sermon on the Mount, I think we see these words in their glory, their real glory.

Our present text, Matthew 7, 7 to 12, I believe, provides the one crucial key that makes the preceding teaching of Jesus practicable. Until we learn to ask and receive, to knock so that the door is open, to seek until we find, until we've learned to do that, we cannot live the Sermon on the Mount. But when we've learned to do that, we can live the Sermon on the Mount.

In other words, what I believe our Lord is telling us here, we have such a Heavenly Father, and we have such a privilege of approach to Him, come to Him and keep on coming to Him with all your needs, and He has everything you need. And there is nothing you can't do that is within the orbit of His will, if you will, by His grace. Rob the sermon of these words, and you are left, I believe, in the same kind of bewilderment as that in which the Blessed Virgin Mary found herself, when the angel made an announcement to her that she was highly favoured of the Lord, that she would be with child who would be great, who would be called the Son of the Most High, who would be given the throne of His Father David, and who would reign over the house of Jacob forever because His kingdom would know no end, to quote from Luke chapter 1, verses 28 following.

You remember how the Virgin Mary was baffled and bewildered by such a gigantic promise as that, because she knew one thing as no one else did, she knew that she was still a virgin. And she says so. And she cried out with anguish, How can this kind of thing be, seeing I don't know a man? What rendered that unique promise believable, however, even certain, was the angel's reply which begins with these words, The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you, and that which shall be born of you will be called a Son of God.

The reply changed the whole situation for Mary, her response now is this, I'm the Lord's servant. Another way of saying, Lord, I'm at your disposal. May it be to me as you have said, then the angel left her.

There's nothing more to do. Now it is somewhat similar with us who have heard the call of this summon on the mount, and all that is therein contained. It sounds beautiful, but impracticable to many of us.

I come to you this morning and I say to you, It is practicable if you are prepared to undergo the discipline of learning how to pray. And when you've learned the discipline persistently, as Jesus said, these are all in the present continuous tense, Go on asking, go on knocking, go on seeking. That's what he said.

Now either he's right or wrong, but if he's wrong, we're in serious waters. We like Mary know that we simply do not have the capacity to achieve so high a calling as that envisaged in this sermon on the mount. It may win the admiration of the centuries as an idea, but do not press its application to life since we're not sure that it can be achieved, unless this be true.

And here we have an open door to the source of all spiritual resources. And by asking and seeking and knocking, we may make them ours. Now that is exactly what our text is, it seems to me.

It announces the means whereby the ideal can become practical and experiential. It tells us how everything Jesus has thus far required of his followers in the body of the sermon may be achieved by ordinary men and women subject to the same temptations as we are in an evil world. Now this cannot other than make us uncomfortable, all of us at some point at some stage or other.

If it is a genuine word of the living God through his incarnate Son, then why are we not more evidently embodying our lives, embodying in our lives the principles of the sermon. Brothers and sisters, if this is true, why aren't more of us in our prayer groups from week to week? Why aren't more of us in the prayer group here in the church? Am I honestly disclosing a reality, the reality of things when I say that we don't believe this? Is it true that God is not sufficiently real to us to believe that he can give what we cannot concoct or bring about by dint of our own energy? And there's not much value in meeting for prayer. Brother and sister, how far and how deeply and consistently is your personal life punctuated by heaven-reaching prayer from day to day? You see, the fact of the matter is this.

Call ourselves evangelicals, call yourselves Presbyterians or Baptists or Anglicans or United, whatever. So many of these titles throw dust into our eyes. The point is, do we know God? And if we do not know God sufficiently to do commerce with him in prayer, on some level there is something radically, radically, radically wrong.

It doesn't matter how well you sing. It doesn't matter how often you come to church. It doesn't matter how much you read your Bible or talk about the Savior.

If this is not true, brothers and sisters, we are up a side alley somewhere. James puts it as bluntly as this. And James, you remember, in the New Testament, can be terribly blunt.

But he says it as bluntly as this. You do not have, he says, because you do not ask God. And then he has a second thought which he adds to that.

He says, when you do ask, you do not receive. Huh? Because you ask with wrong motives that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. Is it true that the church of Jesus Christ is impoverished of power to live the kind of life required by the King of the Kingdom? Because we do not really ask and really seek and really not.

Jesus requires of us to do this and to do so perseveringly. Perseveringly. The prophet Jeremiah had said long ago, and I'm sure it sounded almost too good to be true to most of the early believers.

He had said, you will seek me and find me. This is in the name of the Lord. When you seek me with all your heart.

How much of our heart is in our prayers? I'm sorry we have to come down to this, but you know it's necessary. There is no greater tragic in the history of the church and the life of the church than just lip praying. The heart is the source of prayer.

And if it does not come from the heart and with the heart as well as the mind and the dedication of body, soul, and spirit, then it's no real prayer. How much real prayer marks our personal life. You know, someone, I think it's Dr. D.A. Carson, whom we've had speaking in this pulpit on more than one occasion, has written these words.

The Western world is not characterized by prayer. By and large, to our unspeakable shame, even genuine Christians in the West are not characterized by prayer. And notice what he's saying.

He doesn't say that people don't pray, but we're not characterized by prayer. People wouldn't say about us, their life is characterized by prayer. That's the outstanding mark of their lives.

Our environment, says Dr. Carson, loves hustle and bustle. Smooth organization and powerful institutions. Human self-confidence and human achievement.

I can do it, you know. We can do it. I've got it in me.

That's the attitude, that's the philosophy. Human achievement, new opinions, novel schemes. And the Church of Jesus Christ has conformed so thoroughly to this environment that it is often difficult to see how it differs in these matters from contemporary paganism.

There are, of course, exceptions, but I am referring to what is characteristic. Our low spiritual ebb is directly traceable to the flickering feebleness of our prayers. And that is so.

He who gave us eternal life can alone sustain it and enable us to achieve our calling. You see, let's put it like this now. Let's relate it to its context.

If we would produce the truly Christian character outlined in the Beatitudes, being poor in spirit and so forth, if we would produce the truly Christian character enunciated there, we must persistently ask, seek and knock. If we would be able to count ourselves blessed when men persecute us for righteousness sake, or enacting a salt and light in society, in the conquest of murder and adultery at their source within our own hearts or imaginations, in building society on truthfulness with our word as our bond, or if we would not only regulate our acts of revenge but have love for our enemies, or if we would give to the needy, pray and fast without hypocrisy, lay up treasures in heaven while we refuse to worry about anything because we have such a wonderful Heavenly Father who even has his mind upon the sparrow's fore. If we would overcome our censorious spirit while still maintain a judicious care to distinguish between truth and falsehood, right and wrong, then we must see Jesus' word here as providing the means.

This word here is wrapped up with the sermon. The sermon is not concluded. It's the last verse, verse 12, that concludes the body of the teaching and then from there on Jesus is telling people, now you enter in

here, enter in through the straight gate and so forth.

Many of you call me Lord, Lord, but you're not. And he has something along those lines. And then he talks about building on the sand or on the rock.

But you see all the rest is application. He has inbuilt this teaching into the body of his sermon as if to say, this is how to do it. And I want to say to you this morning, my friend, if it was the last thing I ever said on earth, I believe that this is the primary priority for God's people in every age, but especially in ours.

Neither must we be put off track as it is said here by Jesus because it might appear to us that some people get on quite well without praying. Don't make that mistake. You can never judge how people are getting on until they stand before the judgment seat of God.

Only then will you know. You must never judge a book by the first few chapters, only in the light of the last chapter. It is true, of course, that many natural gifts are given by God the creator to his creatures without their ever asking him.

We've been celebrating some of them this morning. Who asked for this lovely sunshine? You didn't, I didn't. Many things are given to us.

One writer illustrates such gifts in terms of the harvest, the gift of a child or children to a home, food. And our Lord has already referred to the rainfall and to the sunshine. God causes his sun to shine upon the just and the unjust alike.

And we don't ask for them, neither do we thank him for them very often. But in spiritual matters it is otherwise. Here God bids us ask him for our needs.

And scripture goes so far as to indicate that we lack some things, as James says, because we do not ask. Let me quote from John Stott here. He says, God's redemption gifts are different from his natural gifts.

God does not bestow salvation on all alike, but, to quote, bestows his riches upon all who call on him. For everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved. Romans 10, 12 and 13.

The same applies to post-salvation blessings, says John Stott. The good things which Jesus says the Father gives his children, it is not material blessings that he's referring to here, but spiritual blessings, daily forgiveness, deliverance from evil, peace, the increase of faith, hope and love. In fact, the indwelling work of the Holy Spirit as the comprehensive blessing of God, which is how Luke renders good things, Luke 11, 13.

What is Stott saying? What he's saying is this. In spiritual matters God quickens us to life and he says, Now look, trust me, not just to live by faith, ask me, seek me. And if I do not answer you immediately, keep on seeking, keep on asking.

I have a good reason for not giving at that moment. But you are to seek, you are to ask, you are to knock, you are to wait. They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings as eagles.

And you see, we've got such an arrogant view of ourselves, we sometimes fall on our knees, even if we kneel, most of us sit to pray. But even if we kneel, we think that the Almighty, the moment He's heard what we've asked, He's got to come right down and do it, there and then, just as we ask, we expect Him to be at

our beck and call. He says, listen, sometimes I may not give you what you ask immediately, but I know what I'm doing.

Keep on asking. You're very dwelling around my throne and coming into my courts and breathing the atmosphere of the heavenly throne, that in and of itself will do you good. But in due course you shall have, that's the promise, ask and it shall be given you.

Seek and you will find, knock and it will be opened. I cannot, I cannot go back on the word of my Son. There remains one other matter and I conclude with it.

It would be my second point, but I'm only going to refer to it. Our all-excellent Father. You see, what makes this more feasible and more hopeful to us is this.

It's the kind of Father to whom we come. It makes our coming, our failure to come a very heinous thing, a very grievous thing. But what gilds the promise of our Lord with gold is this, that we come to such a Father.

And listen to how Jesus put it. Which of you, He says, if his son asks for bread, we'll give him a stone. Or if he asks for a fish, we'll give him a snake.

Then he moves. If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask Him? Now just take it in briefly. The illustration comes from ordinary life and it's too simple to need any comment.

Nevertheless, I'm just going to say this much about it. Which of you fathers or mothers would, if your child came in and said, Look, I'm hungry. I want some bread or I want some toast or I want something to quench my hunger, to deal with my hunger.

Which of you would go and look for a stone and put it in his hand? I don't think anyone here would do that. Or if he asked for a fish, would you give him a snake? Would you give him something useless, harmful like a stone or unlikable and harmless as a snake? Might we? Well, now look, he says. Don't impugn that kind of thing to your father in heaven.

He knows what you want. And his son has told you, Ask and it will be given. You seek and you shall find.

Knock and it shall be opened. Don't impugn your father as revealed in his son. Don't impugn his character.

And so our Lord gives us a conviction upon which we may launch out into each new day. If you then, though you are evil. His point is not to prove the depravity of the race here, but he's referring to it as a matter of fact.

We're all evil. The best parent has got sin in his heart or her heart. If you then, though you are evil, nevertheless know how to give good gifts to your children, because of paternal sympathy and so forth.

If you know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your father in heaven, not only because he's a heavenly being, but because there's no sin in him, no evil in him, and no evil desire for any of his children. More than that, let's put the positive, because he is the God. He is the compassionate, almighty, all-wise, all-good, gracious God.

He is because he is the God. He is and because particularly he has made you his child, and he is your father. How much more will your father in heaven give good gifts, even the Holy Spirit, which is another

way of saying, of giving himself.

You can't give more than yourself. Of giving himself to those that ask him. Now do you see the picture? You say the Sermon on the Mount is not practicable.

I challenge you to say that again with these words before you. What's gone wrong is this. We've not learned to pray.

We've learned everything else. We're marvelous at sports. This is the day to say it, isn't it? Oh my, we can lick the New Yorkers.

Even I have some excitement out of that. I'm sorry, you Americans. I know there are some here.

You don't mind me saying that this morning. You know, we're marvelous in the world of finance, in the world of commerce, in the world of business. We have our experts, and we're proud of them.

But I tell you, my friend, unless you can pray, nothing really matters in life or in death. And one day you and I will be cornered by disease and death and unless you have learned to pray, you will be miserable, even if you're redeemed. A compelling inducement to pray.

Now you see why I give it that title? If you're a child of God, I believe you know what that means. This text says to you, if you are who you are, you ought to be praying, you ought to be asking, you ought to be seeking, you ought to be knocking the doors. And sooner or later, you ought to be receiving.

If God is God, there ought to be something to manifest the genuineness of your relationship to him and mine. It was William James, the philosopher, who said, energy which but for prayer would be bound is by prayer set free and operates. Philosopher that he was, he saw this.

And if only you and I could see this, that all the power of God is available for us and this is the means whereby we draw it. The woman at the well said to Jesus, you remember in John 4, when he talked about water in the well, she said to him, he says, what are you talking about water from? We're standing by the side of this well or sitting by the side of it, but you've got nothing to draw with. You've got nothing to draw with.

Well, she was wrong, because he could draw water from a rock. But I know many professing Christians who have nothing to draw with. It's all there.

We are blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, says Paul in 1 Corinthians. And Peter adds, all things pertaining to life and godliness have been given to us, but they're not ours. We've nothing to draw with.

We've not practiced the art of asking and seeking and knocking. For if we have, we cease to believe that God means what he says and we've packed up. I call you to come back today.

I don't want you to think of this morning service as a matter of sermonizing. I believe this can be a vital landmark in your experience and mine, and if it isn't, we should be answerable for it. I think it should reflect on all our prayer meetings, all our groups, and the whole life of this church, and any other church you may belong to.

God grant us of his mercy that we may enter into the source room, the room wherein the gifts are imparted to those who wait upon our heavenly Father. Let us pray. Lord, our God, with a sense of contrition do we come before you in the closing moments of our morning's worship because we feel the impact of this your word upon us and we cannot wriggle away from it or out of it.

It does speak to us. We accept that fact and we accept our guilt that we are not characterized, as one of your servants has said it, we are not characterized by prayer. Forgive us, O Lord, and teach us, teach us how to live to your glory and teach us how to use the weapon of faith with which to draw from the wells of salvation every day and every night of our lives.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

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