

Ask Your Father in Heaven

by John Piper

God invites us to pray and promises to give us good things if we ask, and He is a perfect and loving Father who is accessible to us in all levels of presence.

Duration: 41:36

Scripture: Matthew 7:7-8, Matthew 7:11, Matthew 20:28, Matthew 26:28, John 1:12

Topics: "Prayer Life", "Gods Promises"

Description

This sermon emphasizes the importance of prayer, highlighting God's infinite strength, righteousness, goodness, wisdom, and love, inviting believers to come and ask Him for good things. It encourages a deep inclination to pray, drawing from Jesus' teachings in Matthew 7:7-11. The sermon unpacks eight encouragements to pray, emphasizing God's promises to respond with good things, the accessibility of God as our Father, and the foundational role of the cross in answering our prayers.

Transcript

Can you pause and reflect for a moment that God is infinitely strong and can do anything he pleases and that God is infinitely righteous and only does what is right and that God is infinitely good and therefore everything he does is good and that God is infinitely wise so that he knows perfectly what is good and what is right and that God is infinitely loving so that all of his strength and all of his righteousness and all of his goodness and all of his wisdom functions to raise the joy of his loved ones as high as it can be raised forever? When you pause to consider that this God lavishly invites you to come and ask him for things with the promise that he will give good things to those who ask, it is breathtaking. It also means that one of the short-term unspeakable tragedies in the church is that there is so little inclination to pray. Almost anything can take us away from it.

It is as though God spread the most universally lavish banquet imaginable, sent out free invitations to come and eat and we said on our return RSVP, I just bought a field and I must go see it. I just bought five yoke of oxen and I must see them first. I just married a wife and I cannot come.

Amazing. So my prayer now as we begin this year coming is that God would take this message, this text of scripture from the Lord Jesus mouth and use it along with other things he's going to bring into your life and awaken in our church an unprecedented inclination to pray. Just rising up, not coming on down from outside, better do this, but coming up from inside a strong and irresistible inclination to pray.

That's my prayer and so let's bow. Father that's where I want this message to go. What I long for us on our three campuses this weekend to experience and then on into the new year.

I want there to be, would you please grant that there be a rising from within of a strong compelling inclination to pray individually in our closets, cars, cubicles and as families and as groups, small groups and prayer meetings in the church. Lord I beg of you to not throw away words. I'm pleading with you that you would pour out as Zechariah promised you would in the last day, that you would pour out a spirit of prayer and please for mercy, a spirit of prayer and supplication.

Pour out that spirit upon our church I ask in Jesus name. Amen. So here's the approach.

I see in this word from Jesus in verses 7 to 11 of Matthew 7, 8 encouragements to pray. Eight of them. And I'm just going to walk you through, show you in the text, how Jesus is saying come pray, come pray, pray to my father, pray to my father.

These are eight encouragements to pray. I hope that the cumulative effect will be if the first one doesn't awaken you, the second one added wood. If the second doesn't, the third one added wood.

If the third doesn't, the fourth one added wood. If the fourth doesn't, the fifth one added wood and so on. And I hope by the time we get to eight there would be enough welling up.

Okay Jesus, I get it, I get it, you want me to pray, yes, this is a great thing you have prepared for me. That's step one. Step two is simply to, it's short at the end of the message, ask the question, so what do these promises really mean? Receive, ask and you receive, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be open.

What's this receiving and finding and door getting open? Do I get what I want or don't I? That's where we're going. Encouragement number one out of eight. Three times he invites us to pray or you could, if you're willing to hear it lovingly and not burdensomely, three times he commands us to pray.

Ask, one, and you will, it will be given to you. Two, seek and you will find. Three, knock and the door will be open to you.

And then he repeats in terms of promises for everyone who asks, receives and everyone who seeks, finds and to the one who knocks it will be opened. And I think by these repetitions, ask, seek, knock, he means a meanness. I really want you to do this.

I'm offering you this. Ask your Father what you need. Seek your Father for the help you need.

Knock on the door behind which you will find the help you need from God. I invite you three times. I really want you to enjoy this.

I think that's why he didn't just say ask, but instead said also seek, also knock. Three times, repetition, I really mean this, I want you to enjoy this. Number two, even better and more amazing than three invitations to pray are seven promises in this text that he will respond with good things.

Verse seven and eight have six of them and verse eleven has the seventh. Let's read it. Ask and, number one, it will be given to you.

Seek and, number two, you will find. Knock and, number three, it will be opened to you. Four, everyone who asks, number four, receives and one who seeks, number five, finds.

And to the one who knocks, number six, it will be opened. Verse eleven, seven, how much more will your Father, this is the end of the verse, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask? So seven promises. It will be given, you will find, it will be opened, the asker does receive, the seeker does find, the knocker does get the door open, and your Father will give you good things.

Now that's a lavish array of promises. That's a belabored list of promises and surely the point is, would you please be encouraged from the Lord Jesus to pray? This is the Lord Jesus getting inside my mouth and speaking to you. I want you to pray.

I have things for you. Sevenfold promise I give you. Get on your knees and plead with me for what you need.

I will respond with good things to you. Be encouraged to pray. Pray often, pray regularly, pray confidently in 2007.

That's number two. Number three, Jesus encourages us to pray not only with invitations and not only with promises to hear and respond with good things, but also by telling us that he will be found, God his Father, your Father, will be found in different levels of accessibility. I'm trying to get at why he chose these three words here, ask, seek, and knock.

You ever thought about that? Why those three? What's going on with those three? Here's my suggestion of what he's up to with saying, not ask, ask, ask, or seek, seek, seek, or knock, knock, knock, but ask, seek, knock. What's he up to here? If you're a child with a father and you have a need and you're in the house with the father, there are three ways you might ask him. If he's standing right there beside you, in other words, if your experience of his presence is clear and present and nothing in between, you'll just, daddy, would you help me? But suppose he's not in the room and you're not sure where he is in the house and you need his help, then you will go find him, seek him, and when you find him you will say, would you help me? But what if you go find him and the door's shut? He's the door's shut.

He's talking to mom in the bedroom or maybe you can hear him snoring in the bedroom or whatever. He's behind the door. This text says, it's okay, knock.

Go ahead. He's in his study. Daddy's in his study.

Knock, knock, knock. Come in. Daddy, would you help me? So I think the point, there may be other points to this, I think the point is we experience God in all levels of presence.

Some of you right now feel he's really close. It's like right here, that was a glorious worship experience. I'm really walking.

I'm feeling good with God right now. And others, he's not present. And others, for many of you, the door is brass.

So I think this is Jesus' way of saying to every person, whatever your level of accessibility right now, to God, to press you forward, come, come. If he's right there, ask him. If you've got to go looking, go look.

Find him. He'll be there. If you've got to get through the brass door, knock.

He can open brass doors from the inside. He can open any door. He will open.

That's a strong encouragement to me, to know that these different levels of accessibility do not make it impossible to get to him. Number four, fourth encouragement. Notice the word, everyone, in verse 8. He encourages us by making explicit that everyone who asks receives.

See that word? Everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and the one who knocks, it will be opened. Surely in saying everyone, he's talking about his children. Because the text says, if you fathers who are evil give good things, then will not your father, your father in heaven.

He's talking about the children of God. Every one of them, not every person who has stiff-armed Jesus. You know from John 1 how you become a child of God, right? John 1.12, as many as received him who believed on his name, to them he gave the right to become a child of God.

So, we know who the children of God are. Those who meet Jesus and say, yes, this is my Savior. This is my Lord.

I take you. Come into my life. Be for me everything you are.

Yes, but those who say, no, thank you. I will run my own life. Get out of my face.

I don't want to hear this religious stuff. They're not included here. So, put that away and just let it land on all the children in this room.

I hope others who are not will be drawn in, but even children feel, I can't come. I can't come. Not the way I lived 2006.

Not the way I talked. My wife and I had this three-hour blow-up last night. I can't do that.

No way. I'm a loser and there is no way I could, with any integrity at all, come into the presence of God. This text, when he says everyone, he means every child.

Every child. A little mustard seed of faith ready to be squashed out by the devil. Come.

Come. Everyone who asks, every little child, every rebel child. Come.

He will not turn away his children. All are welcome. Be encouraged.

You know, Luther, as bumptious as he was and what a loose mouth he had, he knew human nature so well. It takes a lot of grace to like Martin Luther or maybe it takes a lot of sin to like Martin Luther. I'm not sure.

Here's what he said about this text. Jesus knows that we are timid and shy. That we feel unworthy and unfit to present our needs to God.

We think that God is so great and we are so tiny that we do not dare pray. That is why Christ wants to lure us away from such timid thoughts. To remove our doubts and to have us go ahead confidently and boldly.

Amen, Martin Luther. That's exactly what Jesus is trying to do for all the children here. Number five.

We've implied it. Now let's just say it explicitly. When we come to God through Jesus, we are coming to our Father.

We are coming to our Father. Verse 11. If you then who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father, your Father in heaven, give good things to those who ask.

Father is not a throwaway word for Jesus. It's one of the greatest truths in the universe. That human beings, sinful though we are, can count God as our Father.

And the implications are stupendous. He will never, never, never give us what is bad for us. Never.

He is our Father. Now that leads to number six, which is necessary in every century. And since I haven't lived in every century, I'm not sure whether to say especially this one, but it feels like it.

We need number six especially after number five because of how many of you right now are saying inside your head, that's not what Father means to me. I knocked and he said, get the hell out of here. That's what he said.

I didn't say that. I talked to some of you. Reproduce some of the pain.

So Jesus is way more aware of this than you are, or I am. So what does he do? And this is not the only place. Well, I hope you get this, because this is so important.

It's so important. Number six, Jesus encourages us to pray by showing us that our Heavenly Father is better than our earthly Father, and will far more certainly give us good things than any human father would. There is no evil in our Heavenly Father.

There is evil in every earthly father. This is very important. Fathers need to hear this.

Wives need to hear this. Children, grown children need to hear this. Verse 11, let's read it carefully, think on it deeply.

If you then who are evil. Now, that's quite unflattering, blunt, the way Jesus is most of the time. I mean, just picture yourself.

I'm John, I'm the apostle of love. Don't talk to me that way. I feel beat up.

Why is he doing this? If you then who are evil, John, Peter, James, Matthew, Bartholomew, if you then who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven, who is in heaven, give good things to those who ask? The Bible not only often draws attention to the similarity between human fatherhood and divine fatherhood, the Bible also often draws attention to the vast differences between human fatherhood and divine fatherhood. Think of any other places? Hebrews 12, your father has disciplined you as they thought best. God disciplines you always for your good.

There's one. There are many others. The Bible is not unaware of this pain, of this reality in the world, that all human fathers are evil.

All of us. So, Jesus goes beyond the encouragement of saying, you have a father, you have a father in heaven. He goes beyond that and he says you have a perfect father who has no evil and he contrasts God and his no evil with all fathers and evil.

So, if you had the very best father, you got a good thing coming. God is 10,000 times better than your good father. In fact, I'm tempted to walk over to the wall, put my nose against the wall a little millimeter away and say there's the difference.

I'm going to get all mixed up here because I hadn't thought this through. The difference between a good father and a bad father is this and the difference between God and the best father is infinite. So, you think there's a huge gap between the bad father and the father you wish you'd had and it's really big? Well, compared to how much better God is than the best father, makes that difference very small.

Don't ever limit your understanding of the fatherhood of God to the experience of your own father, no matter how good he was or bad. Rather, take heart that God has none of the sins of your father, none, and has none of the limitations of your father and has none of the weaknesses of your father and has none of the hang-ups of your father, none of them. And the point Jesus is making is that even fallen fathers give good gifts, usually, usually.

Almost everywhere in the world, in spite of sin, in spite of evil, fathers generally are jealous for the good of their children. You try to mess with my kid, you deal with me. That's inside almost every father, sin or no sin.

He's on the side of his kid when his kid's in trouble. That's what Jesus is picking up on. He said, now, if your father, sinner though he be, though you're all evil, if you know how to do anything good for your kid, just think of how much more your perfect heavenly Father is eager to do good things for his children.

So let that land on you. Jesus is laboring with people who have imperfect fathers to help you feel hopeful in prayer. That's what he's trying to do here.

He's trying to get kids, grown kids, 40-year-old kids who have nothing but horrible memories on your face, full of hope that the one in heaven is 10,000 times better. That's what he's trying to do. Would you hear him? Would you hear him? And would you believe him? He really wants you to pray, and he wants you to pray full of hope that your Father in heaven will hear you.

Now, I'm not moving to number seven yet, although I might have numbered this number seven because I saw it after I already got myself numbered. This is an implication inside number six, an implicit encouragement. If he says to his disciples, if you being evil, he just assumes they're evil, which means Jesus has a very realistic view of human nature, namely it's fallen.

This is a clear teaching of Jesus' view of original sin. He didn't mean you disciples are evil and all these people in Judea are good. He meant you, like everybody, are dead in your trespasses until I make you alive, and now you've got remnants of sin and you're all evil.

Just saying that now, think about that. That means that if we go back up to number four, which was the everyone, now we've got an explicit statement that the everyone includes evil children. That's all the kind of children there are.

Isn't that amazing? So now you can go back up to number four and right in the margin, well, he said it really includes rebellious and evil children, but I'm not so sure. But now, what you're going to do when he looks at his own disciples whom he's telling to come pray and says you're all evil? He's saying every one of my children, come, evil children, come, sinful children, come. I'm the only place to come to.

I find that maybe about the most encouraging thing I've seen so far. Just the realistic statement of Jesus, you're all evil. I'm not surprised by that.

Don't go away from me like you'll close yourself, clothe yourself with a fig leaf or something. I know you're naked and helpless, so just come in. I'm the one you need to come to.

I'm okay. I'm really okay. Come to me.

Oh, I hope you hear his invitation. Number seven. Now this one is implicit also, and I think you'll agree it's really here, though it's not explicit.

God will give us good things as his children, give us as his children good things, because he has already given us the gift to become children. Now Jesus isn't arguing that way. That's just implicit here, isn't it? I got this from St. Augustine.

Listen to what he says. For what would he not now give to sons when they ask, when he has already granted this very thing, namely that they might be sons? I mean, think of it. God goes out into the world of rebels.

Get out of here, God. We don't run the world. I don't want a God.

I don't want Jesus. I don't want anything. And he subdues us and freely adopts us, takes this foundling and brings us right into the home, cleans us up.

Now, having done that, are we going to look at him and say, well, he wouldn't give me what I need if I go ask him. Makes no sense at all. If he has given us the privilege of sonship, John 1 12, to those who receive Christ, who believe in his name, he gives the power to become the children of God.

Having done that, why would he turn them down? Why would he say, get out of my study. I'm busy. I didn't choose to be in this family.

You chose me. It's amazing. None of my children chose to be in my family.

Therefore, woe is me if I don't model God to them as best I can. Number eight, it is implicit in these words, I believe, that the cross of Christ, the death of Christ, the blood of Christ, is the foundation for all the answers to our prayer. Hmm, where do you see the cross in these verses? I see it in the tension between evil children here and holy God ready to do everything good for them instead of send them to hell.

We, in our evil that he has named, deserve his wrath. John 3 36. He doesn't give us wrath.

He gives us good things. We ask him. That's a disconnect.

Now Jesus has an answer for that disconnect and it's Matthew 20 28. The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. Ransom? Who needs a ransom? Every evil child needs a ransom, right? If I don't have a ransom, wrath is coming down on me.

The ransom pays for my debt. The wrath is off. Now the Father is all mercy.

He's not a judge with wrath anymore. He's a Father with gifts now. Jesus the cross is everything here and Jesus says it.

He doesn't say it in every verse. You've got to read the Gospels as a whole. You've got to read them from the end.

He died in order to make the Sermon on the Mount work. You can't just pick a verse out here and there and make him an ethical teacher with no substitutionary atonement. Jesus himself said, the Son of Man, me, the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life for all of his evil children so that in spite of our evil we walk right into his room knock knock knock and we expect to find a smile on his face instead of get out of here because I'm the judge of the universe, I'm holy, you're dirty, get out of here.

Never, never, never will God talk like that to his children because of Christ. He said it another time. Listen to this.

This is Matthew 26-28. This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. This is Jesus talking.

I am going to, he's looking on these apostles, alright, at the Last Supper. This is Peter, this is evil Peter, evil James, evil John, evil Matthew, evil Bartholomew, evil Thomas, evil, evil, evil. He's saying I'm going to pour out my blood of the covenant for the forgiveness of your sins so that what I said back there in the Sermon on the Mount about you coming to the Father through me, we got it.

It's gonna happen. I'm paying for it. That's the way it works.

I'm so thankful that we don't just have the Sermon on the Mount. That would just kill us if we didn't have the cross, but now together they're so glorious. They are so glorious.

So that's eight encouragements for you to pray. Jesus is after you to pray. He wants you to pray.

This is not a heaviness. This is a privilege that only blind, evil children run away from, and we shouldn't run anymore. Now let me draw this to a close with that last question I said I would try to answer.

So what do these promises mean? Ask and it will be given you. Seek and you will find. Knock and it will be opened to you.

Everyone who asks receives. The one who seeks finds, and the one who knocks, it will be opened. What do these promises mean? Do they mean everything you ask for, when you ask for it, the way you want it, you get? Well, your experience tells you, I suppose it doesn't mean that because that doesn't happen.

That's not a good way to decide what texts mean. I don't think it means that. That's not my experience either.

It doesn't mean that textually. It shouldn't mean that morally, and you wouldn't want it to mean that if you could. I wonder if you believe that.

Let me take those one at a time. It shouldn't. It shouldn't mean that because if you could at the word, make God do something, you'd be God, wouldn't you? Everything I tell him to do, he does.

You'd be God. If you can boss God, you're God. That's the first reason.

It shouldn't mean that. Shouldn't, because God is God, and he ought to be God, and therefore it's right for God to be God, right for you not to be God, and therefore woe is you if every prayer gets answered.

Secondly, you wouldn't want it to mean that.

I think I might write the Star article this week, if I can manage the creativity, about what happens to the man who the president finds out every one of his prayers gets answered, so you'd be shipped off to Washington immediately. Okay, now pray about Iraq. Pray this, and as soon as you pray that, somebody's gonna shoot you dead, or somebody else can tell you to pray this, or pray this for Somalia.

No, not that. That's not gonna work. Pray this.

No, that won't work. Pray this for Indonesia. Pray this, because that won't work.

Somebody else, excuse me, I wasn't designed to do this. Only God can run the world. I cannot run the world.

Well then, then you just better stop being so eager to be able to have all your prayers answered. So you wouldn't want it, I promise. You'd be crushed in a minute, or assassinated, soon as somebody found out everything you asked for came true.

You don't want that. Now here's that, all that's irrelevant, because it's not in the text. I'm just telling you, biblically, that's, you don't want, you don't want to go there.

But what does the text mean? That's the question. What does the text mean? So the reason I say, not only should it not mean that everything you ask for you get, and you wouldn't want it to mean that, but it doesn't mean that. That's my third and final observation, and the reason I say it is because it looks to me like Jesus is so carefully saying, now if you as a father have a son who asks him for bread, would you give him a stone? Oh, you won't give him a stone.

If he asks for fish, egg, would you give him a serpent? No, you won't give him a serpent. Doesn't that beckon us to ask this? What if the kid asks for a serpent? I think it's unmistakably clear in this text that God would not give it to him. Fathers don't give poisonous snakes to three-year-olds.

They don't do it, no matter what the kid is crying for in the pet shop. Can I hold it? Can I hold the rattlesnake? It just makes such cute noise. I like his teeth.

You just say, you don't understand. You don't understand. No, the answer is no, because I love you.

And the instances of that could be multiplied. God does not give bad hurtful. And I mean ultimately hurtful.

This tries our faith to the limit, doesn't it? Because if you thought that what you're getting after you prayed for this is better, you wouldn't have prayed for that. You would have prayed for this. I asked for healing.

I asked for a job. I asked for a fixed marriage. If I'd wanted this, I would have asked for it.

This is not what I wanted. This tries our faith to the limit. My theology from every part of the Bible is God only gives what is good for his children to his children.

Period. Painful as it has been. And I'm deeply, deeply thankful for the stability that brings into our lives and how many of you, having embraced that sovereign goodness and grace of God, have been enabled to weather some of the most horrific situations.

I am so, so in conclusion, taken as a whole, I think this passage means come to my Father and pray, trusting me that I'm the foundation of everything here. And do not assume that the precise thing you asked for, when you asked for it, the way you want it, it's going to happen. But always know, if it doesn't happen the way you want it, your prayer was not in vain.

Otherwise, this text is useless. This is hash. This text means nothing if asking is pointless, when you don't get what you asked for.

What it says is, if you ask your Father, He will give good things. And James says, we have not those good things because we do not ask. Oh, what we often forfeit because we do not pray as believers.

Good things we forfeit that God would give if we asked. So I invite you to come in and ask in 2007. Let's pray.

Father, I pray that across the campuses on this weekend there would be a fresh inclination, strong compelling inclination for us all. Pray in our private homes, apartments. Pray in our cars.

Pray in our workspace. Pray with spouse and children. Pray with roommates.

Pray in the eight prayer meetings that happen here every week of the year during the week, morning, evening, Sundays. And to pray in their small groups. Oh God, pour out a spirit of prayer and supplication upon us.

I ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

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