

Title: Are you better than God?
Text: Matthew 7.7-11
Theme: God-inspired prayer
Series: Matthew #40
Prop Stmtnt: God's goodness drives us to keep depending upon Him.

Read Text:

Years ago (many years ago) we used to have rotary telephones. They were black and were built like a bank vault. They were also loud. If you happened to be standing next to the phone when it rang, you could lose your hearing for a day or two. Every family had the same phone. And not only that, but you kept your phone for years and years. In those days, if something broke, you fixed it, you did not throw it away. Especially a phone, you couldn't throw it away. You would have to remove your kitchen wall if you wanted to throw it away. There was no caller I.D. Therefore, you never knew who was calling. This made things a bit challenging if you were a guy and wanted to call a girl and ask her out.

You could not discreetly send a private message through Facebook, or email. You could not subtly get the girl's cell number and send her a text and sort of test the waters. Oh no! If you wanted to ask a girl out, and you did not have the guts or the opportunity to do it in person, you called her house. Now, that meant that you had to find a time when you could use the phone. If you had a sister who yapped half the night away on the phone, you were toast. If your parents were home and anywhere near the kitchen, you knew that they would be listening in on your conversation, which is utterly humiliating to a 16-year old boy. And if that wasn't bad enough, then you actually had to make the call having no idea who was going to answer on the other end. Just dialing those rotary phones was jarring enough to make coffee nervous. It never seemed to fail that if the planets were all aligned and you actually had some private access to your family phone and you worked up the courage to make the call, and you dialed the number that (what)...you would get the busy signal sound. It was an obnoxiously humiliating sound. I do not know who developed that sound but I personally think that it must be one of the most irritating sounds you can imagine. There was no voicemail or call-waiting, just the never-ending busy signal that sounded like the warning system of a nuclear plant experiencing a radiation leak. And of course there is no re-dial. Re-dial? You are the re-dial! But, once the call went through...then the true terror set in. Seriously, I think kids today would go to therapy if they had to endure this. Who was going to answer the phone? You did not want the girl's dad to answer the phone. The mom might be okay, but even then, you knew that your business was already out. But the worst was the little sister. And little sister's always seemed to answer the phone. And when you asked for the girl, the little sister would always say, in some snarky Emily Post voice, "And whom shall I say is calling" only to yell at the top of her lungs, for the entire world to hear, "Hey Marcy, Johnny is calling for you. I wonder what he wants?" Only to then say to you, "She will be with you shortly." And then the wait...and you had no idea what was going on. Sometimes the mouthpiece on the other end was covered up and you could only hear muffled sounds, other times the phone would get dropped on the floor, or would just sit on the counter so you could hear what they were watching on TV. And you waited, just

so that Marcy would pick up the phone, so you could pretend to talk to her about other things that you had written down on a piece of paper, until you worked up the nerve, if you ever did, to ask her out. Why would a guy subject himself to such a thing? The risk of rejection is bad enough even when the rejection is private. But in a case like this, if she said, "I'm sorry Johnny, I have to dust my room that night" the rejection feels like it was known to the world. So, again, why would a guy subject himself to the risk? He would do it, if he believes, that he has a chance. It may not be a certainty, but it is a chance. And if he has a chance, then that might be a chance that he is willing to chance. But, if in his heart of hearts he knows that she is going to say "no", he is not going to call.

In this text, Jesus tells us to pick up the phone of prayer and to call on God and to keep calling on God. Why does Jesus have to command us to do this? And why does he have to say the same thing three different ways? The bottom line is this: We do not pray because we are too busy. Let's be flat out honest. We do not pray because we do not really believe God. We are afraid to believe God.

1. **The Commands of Jesus are based on His Promises.** (7-9)

Josh Smith (pic) is a friend of mine who pastors a church in Dallas. He and his wife have 4 little girls. His wife, Andrea has something else. Andrea was diagnosed with stage 4 Lymphoma. The tumor was in her chest. Her doctor said that it took up 2/3 of her chest. She has recently gone through chemo and had the follow-up PET scan. The results were remarkable, but not complete. There was still a spot close to her heart. Without a biopsy they could not tell if it is residual Lymphoma or scar tissue. Right now, they still do not know. Last week, Josh, a pastor, a good pastor, a gospel-believing, gospel-preaching pastor said that he had been afraid to ask people to pray for a miracle. Not only that, he was afraid to ask for one as well. I know what he means. I think we all do. It is more than going out on a limb, it is like jumping off a cliff hoping that a parachute, that you cannot see and do not know if it is there, will come from the sky, attach itself to your back and open up all in time to help you land safely. The commands are not difficult to understand.

A. The Commands

Each command commands us to do it and to keep on doing it.

- 1) Ask (and keep on asking)
- 2) Seek (and keep on seeking)
- 3) Knock (and keep on knocking)

There really is no difference between the three. Jesus is commanding us to pray and he links each command with a promise.

B. The Promises

The promises do not appear to have any qualifiers to them.

- 1) The one, who asks, receives.
- 2) The one who seeks, finds.
- 3) The one, who knocks, will have the door opened.

This sounds like a blank check from Jesus, right? So, why don't we cash it? Have you ever prayed for something and you did not get it? If this text is saying what it appears to be saying then what happens if you try to cash that check and it bounces? What are you supposed to think? The only conclusion is that Jesus lied and the Bible is not true, or it's true for others but it does not work for me.

There is a lot at stake when we pray because the commands to pray are based upon the promises of God. If our prayers fail, then we are confronted with the fact that God has failed. And for so many of us, we fear that if we really ask God and we really believe, that it will still not work. And we want Christianity to be true, but we are afraid to really bank ourselves on God, because if he doesn't come through, then we have nothing to hold on to. And if that ever happened, we would simply not know what to do. What if the atheist is right? What if we are believing a lie? Do you ever think about that? I sure do. So, what is Jesus saying here?

So, you know where I am going with this, don't you? I do not want to gloss over this. I want us to go nose to nose with this. This nice little saying of Jesus exposes some of our deepest fears and insecurities. These verses are not nice and safe. They sound dangerous because we all know people who asked, and sought and knocked and they did not get what they asked for. Isn't that the tension? What are we supposed to think? Before I address that, notice that the tension is intensified isn't it? Not only is Jesus' command to pray based on his promises, but his promises are based on the character of God.

2. The Promises of Jesus are based on the character of God. (9-11)

A. **The Example** (9-10)

The point is clear. You are a dad. Your son is hungry and asks for some bread. What does a dad normally do? If your son is hungry and if you love your son, which a dad is designed to do, then as a dad, you want to feed your son. You do not trick him and mock his hunger by giving him a stone. (By the way, I think that it is significant to note that when Jesus was tempted by Satan, he was challenged to turn stone into bread.) Here, even a normal dad in the world would not pretend to give his son bread and trick him by giving him a stone. You do not pretend to provide for his need by giving him something that is harmful or will scare him. Seriously, if your boy wants a fish (which you could easily buy in the town market), you do not give him a serpent.

B. **The Heart of the Issue** (11)

- 1) You are evil.

Whoa! Hold the phone here for a second. Imagine being in the audience that day. Jesus is delivering this message in which he is talking about what it means to be part of his kingdom. He is saying some really profound stuff. He is giving people a lot to consider. And then right here, he calls you evil. He is not snarly about it, but rather matter of fact. Did he just call us evil? Yes he did! Don't blow that off nor be offended by it. This is a very clear statement of fact on the part of Jesus. He is simply acknowledging that we are part of the human race that is profoundly affected by sin at the deepest level of our being. In comparison to God (and that is his point), we are evil. We ARE evil, compared to God. This is called depravity. This is why so many people were offended by Jesus and wanted to kill him. He spoke truth that was very difficult to accept. The people who heard him gladly were the people who were sinners and who knew they were sinners. The people that hated him were sinners but would not admit it. They were sinners who seriously believed that they were better than others and Jesus called them out on it and they hated him. He called them evil. Which camp are you? Are you willing to acknowledge that you are, compared to God – evil? Or, are you defending yourself right now because you think that you are, in your heart of hearts better than someone else. Remember last week. No one, no one, no one occupies the moral high ground. But depravity does not mean that we are as bad as we could be. Even though we are evil, we still know how to give good gifts.

2) Yet you know how to give good gifts.

How can we, even though we are evil still do some good things? It is only because of God's common grace that the entire human race is not as bad as we could be. Even in our fallen condition, there are still some evidences, some traces of what we were before the fall of man into sin. But, here is where the train runs off the rails. We tend to look at the fact that we "know how to give good gifts" and other relatively good things and we assume that means that we are therefore innately good. What does Jesus call us? He calls us evil, who in spite of our evil condition are yet able to still do some good things.

How many times do you hear people say, "Well, I'm not saying that he or she is an evil person or anything?" Why not? Jesus does. Look, I know that this is difficult for some of you to hear because we really assume that we are much better than we really are. It is a tad shocking for Jesus to say that even "good dads" are actually evil. "Good dads" need a Savior. "Good dads" cannot save themselves by doing good things for their family. Dads can provide bread and fish for their sons, but they cannot rescue their souls. But, if a dad, who is a sinner, and who is rendered guilty and therefore evil by his sin, is still capable of doing some relatively good things and helpful things for his family, HOW MUCH MORE is God able and willing to do good things for his children? Do you see the question that Jesus is pressing on us?

3) Are you better than God?

Do you, in your heart of hearts believe that what you want for your life, or what you want for your children or family or friends is better than what God wants for you or them? Are you capable of loving them more than God does? Are you capable of being intrinsically better than God is? Who is God, really? Is he really good? Is he really love? And here is

where we are going to park it for the rest of the sermon because as I marinated my heart this week on this text, it was verse 11 that unfolded verses 7 and 8 in such a way that they blossomed with beauty and gospel fragrance. But, before I do that, I really need to point out what this does NOT mean. I am seeking to show you clearly and convincingly that the reason why we ask, seek and knock and keep on doing it is because God is good. Many of you have heard some of these truths, but in a twisted, deformed and destructive manner. Let me explain. In the political world, we have what we call “pay to play.” If you want government contracts for building, etc. then it is expected that you pay money into the re-election campaigns of the political officials who have the authority to make those decisions. It is pathetic, it is destructive, but it is sadly the way that so many things are done. While I decry that, what is infinitely worse, is how heretical preachers have done the same thing with prayer. They say things like, if you want God to give you that miracle that you are asking for, if you want God to bless you in a big way, if you want God to come through for you, then you have to show some faith. You have to plant some seeds of faith. You have to show that you are serious. All of which means, you need to give money. You need to pay to pray. In spite of the obvious money-grabbing play, you can see that what this thinking does to our view of God. The basis of God answering prayer is NOT who God is, but the basis of God answering prayer is, how much money you give to grease the machine. It makes prayer self-driven, versus God-honoring. Think about what Jesus is saying here.

Jesus is the one who is speaking and he is speaking about his Father. Jesus did not come into being when he was born in Bethlehem. Jesus is the 2nd Person of the Godhead. He is the 2nd Person of the Trinity who has from eternity past enjoyed and delighted in his relationship as God. That means that the Son has forever been the recipient of His Father’s love, honor, esteem, delight and joy. Jesus is the Son because of the Father. The first Person of the Godhead chose the name Father on purpose. As a Father, he gives life. He did not start giving life when he chose to create. He did not look at an earthly family and think, “wow, dad’s are pretty cool, I think I will call myself Father.” From eternity he has been giving life. Before God did anything else, for all of eternity God has been loving, begetting, sourcing and delighting in the Son. Jesus is the One, who has been eternally proceeding from the Father. He has been loved perfectly by the Father, forever. There was never a time when God was not Trinity. This means that there was never a time when Jesus was not being sourced by the Father, loved by the Father, delighted in by the Father, esteemed by the Father, and enjoyed by the Father. The Son is what makes the Father, the Father. And the Son looks like the Father. The Father is the one who loves which is why the Son is called the Beloved (the one being loved). There is an emphasis in the gospels on the love that the Son has for the Father, but there is a greater emphasis in the Bible on the Father’s love for his Son. The Father is the head. He is the source. He is the lover, the director, the planner and the sender. Jesus is so perfectly loving because he is so perfectly loved. He knows, he knows, he knows not only because it is true, but also because from eternity past he has experienced as the perfect recipient of the Father’s goodness, the Father’s perfections, the Father’s love, the Father’s delight and the Father’s joy. So, it is with all of this experience and perfect confidence that Jesus commands us to ask and seek and knock because he knows that God is incapable of doing anything but good for his children. He commands us to do something that is so good. It is like

commanding your children to eat ice cream. It is like commanding your children to go on vacation with you to the beach. He commands us to do something that is good and delightful. So with that, this is how I have resolved what first appeared to me as a tension.

C. The Resolution

What if what we ask for, is NOT what God gives? This is why v.11 is the key to understanding this. Sometimes what we ask for is not good. Sometimes what we ask for is good. It is as good as we know. It is as good as we can imagine. But what we know and what we imagine is not necessarily the best. What are you doing when you are asking and seeking and knocking? You are asking God for what seems to be good to you. And God will answer that with what is truly good for you. You will get it, but what you get may not seem good at the moment, but it will be revealed as being good. It may not feel good, but it is truly good.

My daughter Rebecca, as many of you know, works at St. Jude Children's Hospital, in Memphis, TN. She said that I want my kids to feel safe with me because I want them to trust me. Why? Because the children who are in her department (bone marrow transplant) are fighting for their lives. And in order for these children to survive, they are going to have to endure some painful procedures and she wants them to know that she is not doing this in order to hurt them, but in order to heal them. Therefore, she wants her kids to trust her.

Now, in the ultimate sense Christ trusts His Father. He followed his Father's plan, all the way to the Garden of Gethsemane. There, he was called upon to drink the cup of the Father's wrath against sin. In other words, in the garden Christ was to formally and actually accept being credited with our sin. When he did that, he would also be making himself the recipient of his Father's righteous wrath. When Christ got to that point, he asked and he kept on asking if there was another way. What he was asking for, seemed good. He was asking that he might not be associated with sin. But what the Father did was answer his prayer with what was infinitely good. It was the ultimate best. Not only did the crediting of Christ with our sin enable us to be forgiven because Christ died for our sin and paid its penalty in full, but the Father accepted the payment, raised Christ from the dead and then exalted him to his right hand while he awaits his return as the King of the Universe. Ask, seek, knock for what is good and God will give it. Ask, seek and knock knowing that if what you are asking for is not the best, that God will do that. Ask in confidence because it is his very nature to do the best for his own.

My pastor friend talked about how he had to work through his hesitancy to ask for a miracle. He said that my "hesitancy to ask people to pray for a miracle, exposed something deep in my heart. It exposed a tumor much greater and more dangerous than the Lymphoma that once filled Andrea's chest. It exposed a tumor of unbelief in our hearts. There are few things more serious than the sin of unbelief.... We are so thankful that God used this moment to expose unbelief in us and call us to greater faith in the days ahead. Our hesitancy to pray BIG prayers reveals what we REALLY think about God. Sadly, it often reveals that we view God more like a retired quarterback who did some

great things back in the old days than a God who is alive and well and longing to display His glory through miraculous works today. In many ways, our lack of asking, seeking, and knocking reveals that we view God more like an idol that has feet but cannot walk and ears but cannot hear (Psalm 115). That is NOT the God of the Bible and not a God we will serve. We would rather die believing in a God who is able to do miraculous works than live believing in a God who is not. When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were faced with being thrown into the fiery furnace, they expressed their unwavering confidence in the ability of God. They were not confident that God would save them, but they were confident that He could. They believed there was something worse than dying because an able God chose not to deliver them. That is living with a god who couldn't deliver if he chose to. This is exactly how we feel. We would rather die believing in a God who is able than live believing in a god who is not.”