

SERMON ON THE MOUNT 12 – MATTHEW 7:7-11:

Imagine you were diagnosed with such a lethal condition that the doctor told you that you would die within hours unless you took a certain medication, a pill every night before going to sleep. Imagine you were told you could never miss it or you would die. Would you forget? No way! You would prioritise it every night. So, let me ask you a question - how could Jesus motivate you to do something spiritually? What could he say, what could he promise, that would get you to move towards him more.

We're in a series through the Sermon on the Mount, the most famous message Jesus ever gave, recorded for us most fully in Matthew's biography of Jesus in the New Testament of the Bible. Today, we come to where Jesus pulled out all the stops to try and motivate people to do one of the most important things spiritually a life can ever do, to pray. Here are his words.

⁷“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. ⁹“Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? ¹¹ 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! Matthew 7:7-11.

To ask naturally indicates prayer but seek and knock are also metaphors for prayer. Ask means we are to come to God with humility and conscious of need as a child comes to their father. Seek links our prayers with pursuing God's will for our life. Such as when a person prays for a job but also checks out leads. Knock includes perseverance in ones asking and seeking as when we persevere in praying for an unbeliever to come to Christ. We as disciples of Jesus are to ask the father continually in our prayer life. Also, we are to seek God's will for our lives and to maintain a determination in expecting the father to answer.

We all need a bit of encouragement from time to time, this kind of encouragement we have in Matthew chapter seven. In the sermon on the mount, Jesus bombards his disciples with uncompromising demands, we know that we can't fulfill all of them. Jesus forbids anger and lust. He commands that we keep our every word and that we give freely to those who need it. He prohibits worrying and forbids boasting. The breadth and depth of these issues would bring us to despair if Jesus didn't pause to bring us encouragement. Fortunately, Jesus does strengthen his disciples resolve at crucial moments in his message.

He invites us to lay aside our fears. For instance, in Matthew chapter six, he tells his disciples about wealth and how to use it. Then he adds this crucial encouragement. ²⁵“**Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?** ²⁶ **Look at the birds of the**

air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷ Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? ²⁸ "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹ So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴ Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. Matthew 6:25-34.

I don't know where you're in your prayer life, but does that make you want to pray more? It does for me. So how is Jesus trying to motivate us to pray? First, Jesus tells us we should pray because God answers prayer. Jesus makes it clear that there is no such thing as an unanswered prayer. So, keep doing it, because it will be answered! The second motivating factor is that it's only through prayer that brings God's response into the picture. That's the whole idea behind asking, seeking, and knocking.

Now, I have heard people say, what's the use in praying because God has already made his mind up. He will do what he wants regardless of my prayers. What God has willed to do is to respond to prayer and he will take our prayers into account. Then third, Jesus says you should pray because whatever it is that God gives to you, whatever it is that God helps you find, whatever door it is that God opens, will be good.

Jesus himself taught his disciples to pray and by extension us as well. Jesus healed people with prayers, denounced the corruption of the temple which he said should be called a house of prayer. He also insisted that some demons can only be cast out through prayer. As we can see in Hebrews, ⁷ **During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Hebrews 5:7.** Jesus prayed regularly with cries and tears.

²¹ **When all the people were being baptised, Jesus was baptised too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened ²² and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."** Luke 3:21-22. Here we see that as Jesus prayed the Holy Spirit came upon him and anointed him.

He was transfigured with divine glory as he prayed. ²⁹ **As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. Luke 9:29.** Further, in

John chapter seventeen, verses six to twenty five, we hear Jesus praying for his disciples and all who believe.

Then after finally petitioning God in the Garden of Gethsemane, he died praying. Immediately after the Lord's death, the disciples prepare for the future by being in constant prayer together, **¹⁴They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers. Acts 1: 14.** Also, we read that all church gatherings are devoted to prayer, **⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Acts 2: 42.**

The power of the spirit descends on the early Christians in response to prayer and leaders are only selected and appointed with prayer. All Christians are expected to have a regular, faithful, devoted vibrant prayer life. In the book of acts, prayer is one of the main signs that the spirit has come into the heart through faith in Jesus Christ.

The spirit gives us the confidence and the desire to pray to God and enables us to pray even when we don't know what to say. Christians are taught that prayer should pervade their whole day and while life. Paul tells us to pray without ceasing. **¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray continually, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. 1 Thessalonians 5: 16-17.** Prayer is so great that wherever you look in the Bible, it is there. Why? Everywhere God is, prayer is.

Prayer tunes our heart to God. Singing engages the whole being. The heart through the music as well as the mind through the words. Prayer helps tune you into God. Prayer is also a kind of pilgrimage. Knowing that we are on a long trek that sometimes is joyous while other times frustrating and even painful. I like the comment of Timothy Keller on prayer, **Even in spiritually lean times, prayer can serve as a kind of heavenly mana that keeps us going, just as the mana in the wilderness kept Israel moving forward to its hope.** He goes onto say, **Mana was simple food, especially savoury but hardly a banquet. Yet it sustained them wonderfully, a kind of traveller's bread that bought an inner endurance. Prayer helps us endure.**

Then in verses nine to eleven, God the father tells us he will answer with what he knows is good for his children. **⁹“Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? ¹¹If 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! Matthew 7: 9-11.**

Staple food in a Jewish daily diet was bread and fish. A responsible father would not be mean and trick his children with stones that resembled bread. Nor would he be hurtful by tricking them with snakes that resembled fish. So, if a responsible father would supply his children precisely

what they need on a daily basis, our heavenly father, who is absolutely trustworthy, will always give us what we really need.

The continual development of our inner growth is found in a persistent prayer relationship with the father who promises to answer their requests with what is good for them. The determination of what is good comes from the values of the Kingdom which is at the centre of Jesus teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.

As we do this, we are also to pray knowing that God sees our needs more than we do and is far ahead of us in fulfilling them. In fact, this is one of the great ministries of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit not only dwells within us, but he also takes the initiative helping us to know what to pray for. The Apostle Paul writes, ²⁶**In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.** ²⁷**And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God. Romans 8:26-27.**

Jesus did not only say that we were to ask God but that we should keep on asking. In the Greek language, which lies behind the New Testament, these words, ask, seek and knock are a directive to pray repeatedly, to persist in prayer. This helps us when we face discouragement. Prayer and persistence go hand and hand.

Richard Glover once wrote that it's like a child and a parent. If Mom is right there in the room, he just asks. If she isn't, he goes and finds her. If she's in the bedroom and the door is closed, he knocks. But no matter what, Jesus says, if you keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking, you will gain God's response! If you don't ask, if you don't seek, if you don't knock, then you won't get, you won't find, and you won't have the door open.

I will finish with these two quotes from Tim Keeler in his book on prayer. **Prayer thought it is often draining even an agony it is in the long term the greatest source of power that is possible. Prayer is awe, intimacy, struggle, yet it is the way to God. There is nothing more important or harder or richer or more life-altering. There is absolutely nothing so great as prayer.**