

Adam Smith: Expectant Prayer

Jesus says, ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you.

For everyone who asks, receives. And the one who seeks, finds. And to the one who knocks, it will be opened.

Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father, who is in heaven, give good things to those who ask him? Let's pray together. Father, we ask today that the gift you give your children would be not just understanding your word or obeying your word or the beautiful thing that it is to worship together and experience family in the church, Lord, but I pray today that you would reveal to us the Father heart of God, who loves, and is generous, and compassionate, Lord, would you speak to your children today? We hear your loving voice calling us near. Teach your word to us, Lord, but transform us.

Help us to know what it means to be your children. In Jesus' name, amen. You may be seated.

Well, I need to be honest with you. This sermon looked very different not too long ago. God convicted me and completely changed the direction that we are going to be going today.

I was convicted when I was praying through the text and trying to figure out how to talk about what God is saying in the text, and I was convicted when I discovered that for much of my Christian life, I had been reading this passage and passages like this through the lens of my own disappointments in prayer and my own disappointment with God. And instead of letting Jesus instruct my heart with his own words, I found myself hedging where Jesus didn't hedge, qualifying, creating disclaimers where Jesus doesn't. And I wonder if I might not be alone in that.

I think many of us hear Jesus' words about prayer or hear Jesus' words about the generosity of God, and yet we assume somehow that access to God's abundance is more restricted than Jesus actually says that it is, that maybe there's conditions or qualifications that Jesus just doesn't include in this teaching. And so my hope for us today is that we would not only understand prayer, we'd not only have our understanding of prayer changed, but that our experience of God would be different when we leave this place, different than it was when we walked in to this place. Because church, make no mistake, this is a radical invitation to enjoy the generosity of God.

Jesus is not restricting access to the Father at all. He's blowing the doors wide open. Access to God in prayer is radically generous.

Think about this for a moment. Jesus offers no disclaimers. He doesn't qualify anything that he's

saying here.

He doesn't say, you know, ask, and sometimes you never know. Maybe, maybe you'll get what you're asking for. He doesn't say if you have enough faith.

He doesn't say if you try hard enough or pray persistently enough. He doesn't say if you clean up your life and are finally worthy of receiving the thing that you desire. He doesn't say any of that.

He simply says, ask, and it will be given. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened.

And just in case we're tempted to miss it, Jesus doubles down and says, everyone who asks receives. Everyone, not the spiritually elite or those who have their lives together or those who have abstained from that besetting sin that just continues to torment you long enough. You've abstained from that long enough just to feel good about yourself, to actually approach God.

That person, that person receives. No, he says everyone. Everyone who asks receives.

And so flat out, Jesus is telling his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount, and he is telling us that through Christ, you have unrestricted access to God's infinite goodness. That through Christ, through faith in Jesus, we have unrestricted access to the abundance of our Father in heaven. You can ask for what you need.

You can seek from God that which you desire. You can knock like you would on a friend's door in time of need. You're invited to bring your longings, your burdens, your joys, your wounds before the God of the universe and know that he is not distant.

He is not reluctant. He's not annoyed. He is a good Father.

Now I have to tell you that this radical invitation to enjoy the generosity of God in prayer makes me uncomfortable because often our experience doesn't always match the invitation. This week, April 16th, my family will commemorate the 19th anniversary of unanswered prayer after asking incessantly, seeking fervently, knocking desperately, believing wholeheartedly that God could heal my father of cancer. He didn't.

I prayed for my dad to be healed. I wanted it. I asked.

And at the age of 51, cancer took him. So yeah, I struggle with passages like this because many of you know, like me, what it is to ask and still ache. You know what it means to seek and not find what you were hoping for and to knock and feel like nobody's there.

Nobody's coming to the door. And listen, we need to address that reality and we will. But before we turn this into a theological explanation for why prayer feels like sometimes it doesn't work, we first need to understand what Jesus says prayer is actually for.

We need to understand what Jesus is actually saying. And Jesus is not trying to lower our

expectations of God. He's trying to raise our expectations of God.

He's not trying to squelch your desire for prayer. He's trying to fan into flame your desire for prayer. You see, sometimes we begin the Christian life with this hopeful optimism, right? And our experience aligns.

It's just our whole world changes, our whole perspective on the world changes. And all of a sudden things that didn't make sense do, things that we had questions about are starting to become clear. And we experience this new presence.

We experience this new power, maybe this joy, this peace, this new love and a settledness in life that maybe we hadn't experienced before. And then we're invited to God in prayer. And those times are new and they might feel uncomfortable at first, but when we experience God listening to us and hearing us, and we have confidence that he does, that he knows what we need.

And then we start to see prayers being answered. The whole world opens up in front of us. And oftentimes it feels like so much hope.

And like nothing ever bad is ever going to happen ever again. But then after a while, we may experience some discouragements in prayer, things that we really desperately wanted, we're hoping for, we're praying for. We even surrounded ourselves with a community of people who prayed with us and for us, and yet we were disappointed.

And after a while, we start to take our foot off the gas. And rather than taking Jesus at his word here, we lower our expectations, believing that we must've misunderstood something. And soon that hesitancy to pray becomes prayerlessness.

As I was thinking about this, I had, it came to mind an experience that I had in my, I was like 18, 19. I was a park aid in the kiosk. At El Cap and Refugio and Gaviota, sorry, Refugio.

Just taught to say Refugio. I grew up pronouncing it Refugio. There's no way that that word is pronounced that way, but I mean, Lompoc, whatever, that's what we called it.

I was a park aid. I was working in selling day use and campgrounds and stuff like that. And when I got hired, I was told that as an employee, we got free campsites.

We could check out the kayaks anytime we wanted. There was like perks. Went along with the job.

And after being on staff there for a year, I camped and I kayaked a lot. And so after a year, we had this employee appreciation lunch and my supervisor gave out awards that were kind of like the Dundees, right? If you've seen the office, just random awards, silly little things about each individual person. And my award that I got was staff member who abuses park perks the most.

Apparently, what I had read in the handbook, I was missing some qualification. I was missing something. Apparently, what I was told wasn't true.

And so I was discouraged from ever asking again. I lowered my expectations for what I had been told I was invited into. Could this be what prayer has become for many? Potentially that we're invited to storm the throne of grace.

And yet we feel like we're accused of taking advantage. Like, oh, that's not worthy of prayer. How am I gonna pray for this little thing that I'm struggling with in life when I know people with terminal diagnosis? That is not worth coming to God for.

This is worth coming to God for. And so maybe we fear that we are abusing the system and need to lower our expectations. And then we get irritated when Christians actually live this way.

Get irritated when Christians actually live like God wants them to come to him with their prayers. Like every time I'm looking for a parking spot and my wife prays for a parking spot, and I'm irritated, not that she's praying, but that it works every single time. Could be a coincidence, but how many times is lightning gonna strike? Like, I'm like, oh, we're driving early Friday.

She's like, dear Lord. And I'm like, and then all of a sudden someone moves out of a spot. See, our disappointment often causes us to lower our expectations so much so that when people actually live according to Jesus' invitation, it feels like an abuse of the privilege.

I wanna summarize something that theologian Dale Bruner says in his commentary on this. He says, Jesus is not primarily concerned with his disciples abusing their access to God. Rather, he is concerned that in their lack of faith, they will not use their access to God.

Jesus is not concerned about his disciples praying too much. I can say beyond a shadow of a doubt that nobody in this room has ever prayed too much. You are not going to die and stand before God and hear God say to everyone else, well done, good and faithful servant.

Well done, enter the joy of your master and then get to you and say, not you again. It's not gonna happen. It will not happen.

Jesus knows that our temptation will be not to pray before it is ever to abuse our access. And so this text is not trying to explain why prayer sometimes feels like it might not work. Jesus is showing us why it does work.

Jesus shows us why prayer works. And it works because of who God is. So God is not just able to give us what we ask for.

He is eager as a good father. He says, which of you, if his son asks for bread, we'll give him a stone. Or if he asks for a fish, we'll give him a serpent.

The implication, the assumed obvious answer is no one. No one's going to do that. When your kid asks for someone, you don't trick them.

You don't deceive them. You don't mock them for their need. You don't hand them something harmful in disguise.

Then Jesus says, if that's the way it works in the human realm, if you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, then how much more will your father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him? Hear what he's saying. Jesus is saying that God is not less generous than a good dad, he's more generous. He's not less loving, he's more loving.

He's not reluctant to give. God delights to give good things to those who ask him. See that relationship, God as father, it changes everything.

Because if God was just a wealthy benefactor, he might have the ability to give, but we wouldn't have the right to ask. Think of the wealthy billionaires in the world, like Elon Musk. Elon Musk could change the financial situation of everyone in this room a thousand times over without it ever affecting the bottom line.

The problem is, we don't have the relationship that gives us the right to ask. If we were one of his like 97 children, it might change. Maybe not, I don't know.

But the relationship changes the right to ask for what we need from our father in heaven. And that's what Jesus is saying here. He's saying God's not just powerful, he's not just our king, he's not just Lord and creator, he is our father.

And I know for some in the room that's hard to hear because you didn't have a good dad. You didn't have a present dad. Maybe you had an absent father, maybe you had an unsafe father, an abusive father.

So when you hear that God is father, it doesn't feel comforting, it doesn't feel welcoming, it doesn't feel empowering or inviting. But listen, don't make the mistake that the enemy wants you to make. The enemy wants you to take your fatherhood, your earthly dad's failures and project them on God as father.

That's what he wants you to do. He wants you to take the failures of your earthly dad and project them on God. But we cannot judge God by our earthly father's failures.

The problem is not that God is a bad father and so our fathers are bad fathers. The problem is that your earthly father failed to image the God he was made to reflect. Your earthly father failed to be like God in your life, generous and loving and protective and present.

So you can't judge God by your earthly father's failures, but you can discern and understand your earthly father's failures in light of the perfect love of God. We have to get that right. There is a

relationship between who God is and our experience with our earthly dads.

There is a relationship, but that relationship needs to work the right direction. It needs to show us, our fathers should be showing us what God is like. And the reason that's so important is because when they don't, as kids, we don't know the difference.

As our father was, so we are tempted to accuse God, but rather as God is, so we should understand how our fathers do and do not accurately show us the father's heart. And so God, as a father, loves you. He will never leave you.

He'll never be ashamed of you. As you are in Christ through faith, he is well-pleased in you, which then once again just returns us to the tension. If God is a good and generous father, why hasn't prayer always felt like this? There are things that we've asked for, good things.

God honoring things, things that we believed were good for us and believed that were what God desired, things that we prayed for with faith that we didn't receive. And so what do we do with that? Usually what we do is go one of two directions. Either one, we blame ourselves, right? If Jesus is right, then there must be something wrong with me.

And then we have a number of people in our lives who will tell us, well, you didn't have enough faith. Or you gave up, you weren't persistent in faith. You quit praying and so God didn't answer the prayer.

Or James says, you ask and do not receive because you ask with wrong motives. And so we have plenty of people who will gladly speak the voice of the enemy to us and say, it's your fault, it's your fault, it's your fault, it's your fault. You didn't do it right.

Now, these things, faith and persistence and motives, these are important. They are, God cares about them. And I can show you any number of passages in the New Testament that will highlight these things and encourage us to be mindful of these things.

But all of these things are shockingly absent from this teaching on prayer. In the Sermon on the Mount, one of the most central teachings in Jesus' ministry, it's absent. Any aspect of faith being required or persistence or any of that.

And so if it's not a problem with me, then it must be a problem with God. Maybe he's not listening or he's not willing or he's not able or he's not good. Which is again, something that the enemy would love you to believe.

That he's either not there or if he is, he doesn't care. But what if the problem is not that God is failing and not simply that we are failing? What if we're misunderstanding the purpose of prayer? And we see this when we remember where we're at in the text. Like I said, this is the Sermon on the Mount.

The central teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is the kingdom of God and the character of God's kingdom citizens. And so all throughout this sermon, Jesus has been teaching us who we are becoming. And just a few verses before this text, Jesus teaches us that we are to be a people who seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

And so now when Jesus says, ask, seek and knock, he's not changing the subject, he's going deeper into it. See this invitation and these promises belong to a people who are not only part of the kingdom, but are seeking the kingdom and the will of God in and through their lives, not just seeking our own desires. And so that means that prayer is not primarily the way we receive from God the things that we want.

Prayer rather is communion with the Father through which he forms us into the kind of people he wants us to be. And a massive part of who we are and who we are becoming is expressed and understood in what we desire. And so prayer is not just the place where we express our desires to God, prayer is where our desires are shaped by God.

It's where they are examined, it's where they're purified, it's where they're transformed. You pray and then through prayer, God shapes your heart. One of my favorite passages is delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.

And I say it all of the time, but that doesn't mean whatever you come to God with in desire he gives you, it means he actually gives you the desire. That desire may have been there before you prayed or it may have taken shape through prayer, but God actually gives us the desire to ask for the thing that he desires to give. And when those things align, something beautiful happens.

We desire not just things, we desire not just the kingdom of God or his will, we actually desire to see the world the way God sees it, to feel about the world the way God feels about it, we actually desire to become like we were made to be, which is like God. We begin to walk in step with God. We begin to, again, desire the things that God desires.

And this is beautiful because this means that you don't have to figure it out before you pray. You don't have to wonder whether or not what you're asking for is God's will or not. You don't have to wonder how God's gonna feel about it or if you're going to a corporate prayer gathering, you don't need to worry about what other people in the room are gonna feel about your prayer request or maybe after the gathering, we're gonna have a prayer team here at the front to the right and to the left and maybe you've got something on your heart and you don't need to worry about whether or not that's worthy of coming and asking prayer for.

That's not your concern. Your concern is I have this desire. I have this need.

I can't see another way around it. I am asked to bring that courageously to the throne of God and you don't need to figure it out before you pray because you know that your father in heaven will receive you as you are and shape you through the process. Isn't that beautiful? We don't have to

second guess our prayers.

We don't have to wonder whether or not it's okay. We can come to God. My kids ask for things all the time that I have to say, I'm sorry, not now.

Maybe it's like, cause dinner is in an hour and we're gonna have dinner together and so no, you can't eat the tube of Oreos which is usually my problem. Sometimes we come to God as a child comes to their parents asking for something and maybe it's not good for us or it's not the right time or whatever else it might be, but we don't have to figure that out. God will shape us through the process because prayer is about coming to God as his child.

The only reason a child can ask freely is because they trust their father and a good father doesn't deceive his children. A good father though also does not give his children everything they ask for and so when God gives, it's with fatherly love and when God withholds, it is also with fatherly love and if you wanna know whether or not that's true, all you have to do is look to Jesus. See the cross proves that God is both generous when he gives and also trustworthy when he doesn't.

Jesus is proof of the father's generosity. John 3 16, for God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that whoever believes in him would not perish but have everlasting life. What greater value could the father give than his one and only son? And so Paul also declares in the book of Romans, he who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also graciously give us all things? He's already given us everything.

What more, coming with our desires is not like, well, that's the last straw, not you again. No, he's already given us everything in Jesus. God is so lavishly generous with us that he sent his son to shed his blood on the cross so that through faith, we might become children of God.

Don't let familiarity with that diminish how mind-blowing of a fact that is. Jesus is proof of the father's generosity. And also in Jesus, we see that God is trustworthy when prayers go unanswered.

And I know some of you say, God never leaves prayers unanswered. It's either yes, no, or wait. Like I get that, but Jesus is saying, ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knocking will be open to you.

And so the unanswered prayer in this sense is unfulfilled prayer. Maybe that works better with how you're thinking about this. God is trustworthy when prayers go unanswered or unfulfilled.

We see that in the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus prayed, Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me. Let the suffering that I'm about to experience bypass me.

I don't look forward to it. If there's any other way, I would like this to be different. And then nevertheless, not my will, but your will be done.

And then the cup, the suffering was not taken away. Now, did Jesus lack faith? No. Did he pray incorrectly? Did he have wrong motives? Not at all.

The most perfect human being to ever live prayed the most perfect prayer ever prayed and received a no. Not because his father was cruel, but because through the unanswered prayer of the Son of God, the greatest gift in the history of the world would be given to you. Salvation, the greatest no in history became the greatest yes you and I will ever receive.

Through the cross, we see that God is generous beyond measure. He is trustworthy even when we don't understand and God's no is never the absence of his love even when we don't understand it. So don't stop praying because prayer never fails because in prayer, you are never abandoned.

In prayer, you are ushered into the presence of the Father. You are empowered by the Spirit of God and you are being shaped into the likeness of the Son of God. And so brothers and sisters, ask, seek, knock, not timidly, not cynically, not as people trying to control outcomes, but as desperate and trusting children come to your Father in heaven with what you desire.

Bring your real prayers, bring your honest longings, bring your disappointments and your confusion and keep coming again and again and again because he hears you, he loves you, he knows what you need. Sometimes what you need is different than what you think you need. Sometimes it's better than what you think you need.

And every time what you need comes not only as it is, but comes with intimacy with God, which is ultimately the greatest gift because the greatest treasure of all is Christ, amen? So ask, seek and knock and expect great things because your Father in heaven is good and he loves you. And so let's go to him in prayer now. Father, we believe what your word says.

Lord, we choose to believe what Christ says on the page, that our Father in heaven knows what we need before we ask, that we don't need to use many words to get your attention, but that we can simply come honest, desperate, vulnerable, joyful, full of desire, full of hope. And Lord, you are big enough to carry all of that. Forgive us, Lord, when we try to distinguish between what is worthy of your time when all you want is our hearts.

All you want is time with us. And so Lord, through our desires, would you shape us? Through our prayers, would we become more and more like Christ? And through our prayers, would we experience more and more of the loving compassion of our Father in heaven? And so it's to you who we turn at this time, Lord. As we sing and as we pray and as we celebrate communion, we would do so with our whole selves, with our whole hearts, trusting that in your presence, we are transformed.

May we run to you now, in Jesus' name, amen.