

Pray: Ask and Submit
Key Verse: Mt 7:7
Tim Becker – January 1, 2017

1. Introduction

[put up picture of house on 414 Emerson St.]

I'd like to tell you a story about this house and how it changed my praying ... for the worse ... for many years. Near the end of 1982 Renee and I were 24 years old and we moved from Newport, RI to Rochester, NY. We rented a nice little home close to my work on the east side the city. In the spring of the next year our friends from Newport moved to Rochester and bought a home on the other side of the city. Our friends wanted us to live in the same neighborhood as them and boldly asked their next door neighbor if he was interested in selling. The neighbor said yes. We negotiated a price with the neighbor and applied for a loan. How exciting ... we'd be moving into our first home and right next door to our friends. This was May or so. We figured we'd be moving by the end of the summer. House closings normally happen in a month or two, right?

Every week or so, I'd call the bank to see how things were coming with our loan application. We had some hiccups with one of my school loan papers not arriving at the bank. After 4 weeks or so, the bank had all the documentation they needed, but our loan was not yet approved. We had other friends who were buying houses. They closed in 6-8 weeks. Why not us?

What would you do? I made regular calls to the bank, trying to be a nice but squeaky wheel. That wasn't working. So I prayed. God, please make this closing happen soon. A third month went by and we hadn't closed. I prayed more. A fourth month went by and no closing. I prayed more. A fifth month ... no closing.

What would you be thinking about at this point? I began to think about prayer. How is this supposed to work? I thought I was supposed to ask God and God was supposed to grant my request. It was obvious to me that this wasn't working. I began to come to the conclusion that prayer didn't work like this.

We closed in November, 6 months after we applied for the mortgage. The bank never told us why it took so long: no bad credit, no shortage of income, no lack of down payment funds, just 6 months to get a mortgage and close on our first home.

This shook my view of God and prayer. What I thought I understood was shattered. My view of prayer moved from "I ask and God answers" to "God does what he wants, so why should I pray."

Have you ever had your view of prayer shattered? For me it was over a house. For some of you it has come as you prayed for a boy to like you, a child to take a saving interest in God, the health of a loved one to be restored, the health of a marriage to be vibrant again. Have you moved to "God does what he wants, so why pray?" Or maybe you moved to

“My prayers don’t get answered, so I doubt there is a God in the heavens.” I’ll bet if we were together in a more personal setting, many of you could tell a story like mine that shook your view of prayer.

My prayer shattering time happened 33 years ago. It took a couple decades for God to reform my view of prayer in a more biblical way. “God does what he wants, so why pray” is not what the Bible teaches. My interpretation then was wrong. And my interpretations always need reforming by God’s word. So if your view of prayer needs reforming, then join me right now in looking at some Scriptures on prayer.

Before we do that, please pray with me.

* Pray

God, we need you. Some of us stopped praying long ago. Some of us never started. Others of us pray weak no-faith prayers. Some of us pray so boldly that we start bossing you around. Our view of prayer needs reforming. Please speak with us and change us today. Amen.

2. Why pray?

Pastor Brian preached on the First Baptist heart statement on prayer about a month ago. That statement says that prayer is our greatest work. One of the questions Brian answered in that message was why pray. To help us see that answer, Brian pointed us to Psalm 127:1, “Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.” Yes, the builder builds and the watchman watches, but unless the Lord builds and watches, their work is useless. So we don’t stop building and watching, but we must pray that God will come and make our work fruitful, not vain. God is the ultimate worker of good in the world. Our fruitful working is dependant on his work. Only his work needs no one’s help. So Brian said, “The scriptures teach us that the true work that must be done is only done by God.” This is why we pray, to ask God to do this true, good, and lasting work in us, in those we love, and in the world.

* Summary

So why do we pray? We pray to ask God’s help because we need God’s help, everyday and with everything we do.

3. What is prayer?

What is prayer? A classmate of mine, Marshall Segal, wrote in a Desiring God article on the internet, “Prayer is conscious, personal communication with the God of the universe.”

We don't pray while we sleep. We must be conscious. We can't have our computer or another person pray our prayers. Prayer is personal.

Prayer is communicating with the God of the universe. Prayer is not talking about him, but directly to him. Prayer is communicating with God, not with another spirit or person. The Scripture is clear that it is an abomination to communicate with the dead or other spirits (see Deuteronomy 18:9–14).

Prayer can be talking aloud or “talking” silently with your mind forming the words and your voice silent. You can write your prayers to God. But write them to him, not about him. Prayer is focused on God, not on something else. If you are in your happy place and thinking about happy thoughts, this isn't automatically prayer unless those thoughts are directed toward communicating with God. Prayer must be intentional. For you to be really praying, you must be actually trying to communicate with God.

Prayer includes a variety of communications, like praise and confession and thanksgiving and asking. Our prayers ought to do more than ask God for help. They really should include praise and confession and thanksgiving as well. But we need not feel guilty when we ask, even if most of our prayer time is spent asking for help.

* Summary

What is prayer? Prayer is conscious, personal communication with the God of the universe.

4. Asking is good

I said that we need not feel guilty when we ask God for something in prayer. Does the Bible actually encourage our coming to God with requests? Or is that seen as being too forward? Let's imagine that I was on a White House tour and ran into President Obama. Imagine I said to him, “Mr. President, I've noticed that you are a skilled communicator and so would you please tutor me some public speaking skills? I'll give you a call later today to make an appointment.” That would be inappropriate. My request would be too bold, too forward. He's the President of the United States. He has more important things to do than one-on-one teach a pastor from Medford some public speaking skills.

God is far higher and more important than President Obama. Is it right to ask God for things I need? Open your Bibles to Matthew 7:7–11. This is on page x in the pew Bibles. Jesus is talking here about asking the Father for things we need.

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

Jesus says straight out, “Ask, and it will be given to you.” And he says that your Father in heaven will surely give good things to those who ask him. Why would Jesus need to say this? ... because he knows that people will hesitate to ask God for what they need. Jesus says, don’t hesitate.

After Jesus’ last supper with his disciples, the gospel of John records 6 times where Jesus is telling his disciples to ask God for what they need (Jn 14:13, 14; 15:7, 16; 16:23, 24). Here is the first one from John 14:13, “Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.”

* Summary

Friends, Jesus says to us right now, don’t hesitate to ask God in heaven for what you need. He is a good God and knows how to give good gifts to those who ask him.

5. Don’t ask for God to aid your adultery

Why don’t you ask God for what you need? While some of us think our asking might be inappropriate, more of us don’t ask because it doesn’t seem to work. We ask God for something and we don’t get what we asked for. So we stop asking. Why doesn’t your asking God work?

Look with me at James 4:3–4

³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. ⁴ You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

What reason does James give for why we don’t receive what we ask God for? He says that we ask wrongly. What is wrong asking? When what we are asking for is for feeding our passions. And what passions are wrong? Those that lead us away from God. God wants to be your husband and he is jealous that you want to be his bride.

Imagine a good husband who provides for the needs of his wife. And one day she asks him for a plane ticket so she can spend a romantic weekend with a man she met on the internet. Should the husband purchase the ticket? Never. He provides for her because she is his wife. And he is rightly jealous that she not spend her passions on another man. When we spend our passions on anything disconnected from our passion for God, God calls us an adulterer. When we cultivate passions for the world, we are hating God. This is what “enmity with God” means. We cannot be his bride and at the same time be the bride of another.

For almost as long as I can remember, I’ve wanted a red sports car. I would love to drive one ... fast, of course. But I’ve never been able to see a strong connection between my

desire for this car and my desire for God. I want the car, but not because it leads from or to my desire for God. I fear that getting a red sports car would lead me to adultery from God. So I've never prayed for a red sports car.

Let's not get this wrong. The fundamental problem is not a red sports car. It's not that no God lover should ever ask for a red sports car. The fundamental problem is that no God lover should ever ask for a red sports car if that car would satisfy his desires independently from God, that is, if his desires would find their highest satisfaction in the car rather than in God.

So what are you asking God for? Each of, right now, get an answer in your mind. What are you asking God for? [Pause.] Examine your passions, your desires, for that thing. In wishing for this thing, is it because the thing will help you love your God more? Or is it another lover, other than God? Even good things become bad things when we want them apart from wanting God. Like me, you might have some physical pains that you wish would go away. But why do we want God to take them away? So that our lives would be more comfortable? Comfort whispers persistently to be my lover. You and I must turn away from its seductions. Now that is something to pray for ... that God would help you see comfort's seductions and empower you to turn away from them and turn to God alone who satisfies completely and forever. Comfort is just one illicit lover. Others are security, being liked by others, control, reputation, wealth, ... Which one whispers persistently to you? Really, choose an answer. [Pause.] You can't fight your slip into adultery against God if you don't recognize the illicit lover that is to calling you.

Listen to God's word from Jeremiah 2:11–13.

¹¹ Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for that which does not profit. ¹² Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the LORD, ¹³ for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.

* Summary

Why don't we receive what we pray for? Sometimes it is because we ask wrongly, to spend it on our passions. So examine your desires in asking. Don't ask for God to aid your adultery.

6. Ask in a way that submits your will to his

Earlier we looked at Matthew 7:7 where Jesus said, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." Yes, ask. Don't hesitate. But this isn't the only thing the Bible says about asking. We just learned from James that we need to ask with right motives. Are there are other conditions to asking and receiving? Yes.

Another passage we read earlier was John 14:13, “Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.” Jesus says here that he will do whatever you ask him to do if it is in his name. What does that mean? Well first let’s say what it is not. Christianity is not a religion of magic incantations.

What do I mean by magic incantations? In one of the Harry Potter stories the class of young wizards is learning a magic spell to make an object levitate. Ron says, “WINGARDIUM levio-SA!” Hermione (her-My-nee) corrects him saying, “Stop, stop stop! You’re going to take someone’s eye out. Besides, you’re saying it wrong. It’s Levi-O-sa, not Levio-SA.” In the story, the way this works is that if you say the magic incantation right, you can do whatever you want with the power. Prayer is never like this. The Bible does not teach that if you say the right words, then you can ask for whatever you want and God will answer your prayers. This would make you god and would make God your powerful servant.

So what does Jesus mean by our asking for something in his name? Prayers in Jesus’ name are “prayers that are offered in complete accord with all that his name stands for” (D. A. Carson in PNTC commentary on John). Let me say it another way. Jesus is saying that he will grant what we ask, when what we ask, is what Jesus wants to do.

I often add the words, “In Jesus name we pray” to the end of my prayers. This isn’t wrong. But ... it isn’t some magic ending that transforms a prayer that accords with my name into one that accords with Jesus name. Adding those words on the end is for our benefit, not God’s. Those words can help us remember that the only prayers God will grant are ones that truly conform to what Jesus would want to accomplish.

We see something similar in the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6:9–13. Please turn there with me. It’s on page x in the pew Bible ... Matthew 6:9–13. Jesus tells his disciples here, “⁹ Pray then like this: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. ¹⁰ Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread, ¹² and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.’”

In this passage, Jesus does not mention praying in his name. So what do we see here that is like what we learned about praying in Jesus name? It is verse 10, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Jesus says here that we should pray for God’s will to be done. Often when we pray, we are asking God to do our will. To pray a prayer that is really in Jesus name is the same as praying a prayer asking for God’s will to be done.

How do I pray for particular requests and yet do it with a desire for God’s will to be done? If my heart is saying, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”, then this affects my praying in at least 3 ways. First, I won’t even ask God for something that I know is outside his will. “God, help me see Sam’s test paper so I can cheat and get the answer to question number 3.” I can’t pray that if I want God’s will to be done above my own, because God never wants me to cheat on a test.

The second way my prayers are affected if I want God's will to be done is this. Suppose that what I want is not obviously wrong and in many ways it seems right and good. This was me wanting to buy that house in Rochester. It wouldn't be a sin for me to purchase that house. And I could see some ways that it would be good. So I ask God to help us with that. Now suppose we didn't get the house. If I want God's will above my own, then I happily stay living in our rented house until it seems right to try again. The fact that I wasn't happy when our house purchase was delayed should tell us all that I wasn't wanting God's will above my own.

Now what if God gives me the house? I prayed for it and he granted it. If I want God's will to be done above my own, then even as I'm enjoying the new house, I'm enjoying more that God's will was done, than that my will was done. And I'll be happy to give up that house whenever God chooses. Why? ... because I want his will done more than I want the house.

Like in many things, seeing what is right to do is a lot easier than doing what is right. Examine yourself: how do your prayers and your motives match up with only wanting God's will to be done, not your will to be done? Are you praying for some things right now that if God doesn't grant them, you'll think ill of God? Be honest with yourself. I imagine that most of us are praying some things that are in that category. Would you let me lead you in a prayer about this, right now? If you'd like, you can pray these words as I say them aloud.

God, I'm a sinner. Most everything I do or think is tainted by my sin. It was all your doing when you first called me from death to life, when you first opened my eyes to see my sin as ugly and your salvation as beautiful. And it is all your doing now when I turn away from wanting my will done and joyfully yield my will to yours. Please forgive me for prioritizing my will above yours, even in my prayers. I don't know how to change that. I need you to change me. Come and take over my will. Have your way completely with me. Change my very desires so they are for your name to be hallowed above my comfort and my security and my pleasure. I believe this prayer is in line with Jesus name. So please hear me. Amen.

* Summary

So where are we? We've seen that we are to not hesitate to ask God for what we need. At the same time, our asking is to be submissive to the will of God. When you don't ask God for what you need, you fail to see him as your provider. You will see yourself as your provider. This takes God off the throne in your life by making him so uninvolved as to be useless to you. On the other hand, asking selfishly is wrong. This takes God off the throne as well by making him your servant and you his master. So we have not-asking on one side and asking-selfishly on the other. In the middle is right-asking. In right-asking we joyfully, spontaneously, often ask our Father in heaven whenever we have a need. And yet we submit our every need to his will, believing that getting what God chooses for us is always better than getting what we think we need.

7. Ask persistently

One reason we determine that God doesn't answer prayer is that he doesn't answer it on our time table. If we aren't God, then not only should God not give us everything we ask for (because we sometimes we ask for wrong things), but he shouldn't always give it to us when we want it. He's God after all. He had the wisdom to stitch the universe together at creation. Would we know how to put all the parts of an ecosystem together so it could survive thousands of years? So then we ought to expect that God knows better than us what to give us and when.

Yet, Jesus wants us to ask for what we need, rather than just wait for it without asking. Why? Asking God for what we need does something inside us. Prayer changes us. How so? If I come to ask your help with something, this elevates you. I have a need that you can meet. And by my asking for your help, I acknowledge that you have something valuable that I don't have and that I would like your kindness to help me.

John Piper says that the giver gets the glory. God is the giver. And we need what he has. When we ask for God's help, we honor him. We acknowledge that he is superior to us.

So when we ask and he doesn't grant our request, what should we do? If it is a request that we believe to be within the will of God, we should keep asking. Colossians 4:2 says, "Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving." Certainly this means, keep praying. Don't stop.

What is the longest you've ever prayed for the same request? I prayed for the salvation of someone I loved for over 10 years. And then to the praise of God and for my great joy, God granted that request and they became born again. But I've been praying for another for 4 decades. I'm still waiting for God to save them. I share these not because I want you to think I'm terrific at praying. I don't think I am. But I want you to be encouraged to pray long, pray steadfastly. May God grant our good requests in his time. May he give us endurance to keep asking. May our long yearnings for him to act result in more love to him and more glory to him. The giver gets the glory.

* Summary

So when God doesn't grant your request in the time you were hoping, don't give up, but keep asking him.

8. Prayerlessness comes from faithlessness

How do you feel about how much time you spend in prayer each week? If someone watched your private praying, would what they see match with the faith in Christ that you

claim to have? I've had seasons where I'm praying as I think I should. But I've had many more seasons when that is not the case. Why don't you and I pray more?

As I've thought about why I don't pray more, I've come to the conclusion that my prayerlessness comes from faithlessness. Jesus tells us to ask the Father for whatever we need. So why don't we ask more often? One big reason is that we don't think our prayers make a difference in getting what we need. We can see that money makes a difference. We can buy what we need if we have the money. But prayer?

Is there really a Father in heaven who will feed his children as he feeds the birds? Or do I feed myself because I work hard at my job? Will God really give good gifts to his children who ask him? Or does God only give hard things, bad gifts, to his children and so I better provide myself with the good gifts I need and want and be wary of asking God for help? Does my asking God to do good actually change what happens around me? Or does praying really do nothing on earth and so I better get to work doing the good and leave God out of it?

You see these are all questions of faith in God. Is there a God? Does he provide for all the needs of his children? Does he give only good gifts to them? Does he want me to pray so that he can be glorified when he gives? Faith is not the same sight. Many of us have been taught that and agree with it. Yet, are you judging the effectiveness of your prayers to God by the standard of sight? Even if you'd never say it aloud, are you thinking, "My prayers to God don't work. I don't see anything change when I pray." Brothers and sisters, be convicted that that thinking is not from faith.

The next time you find yourself reluctant to pray, feeling that it is a waste of time, that nothing will change because you pray, rehearse these statements of faith in your mind and heart.

1. God wants me to ask him to do good where I see that good is needed.
2. God always does good.
3. God will surely act in response to my prayers, Jesus says so. And he will act in his good time and in his good way.

Then pray through your prayer list. And smile as you pray, because you are remembering what a privilege it is to personally communicate with the God of the universe.

This is the word of the Lord for us this morning.

* Communion