

Pray Now

Matthew 7:7-11

The theme this week for our 40 Days of Prayer is “Pray Now” and the main idea being expressed is that God wants us to learn to come to him regularly and often with our needs and requests. He wants us to come to him as children come to a good father to ask for help in our time of need. Jesus explained this to his disciples in Matthew 7:7-11: *“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 wanted his disciples to know that their heavenly Father was ready and willing to give them good things and wanted them to ask. Paul teaches the same in Philippians 4:6-7: *“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* James 5:13-14 says: *“Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. ¹⁴ Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.”* Hebrews 4:16 says: *“Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”*

Scripture is clear that God is inviting us to come to him as his beloved children and ask for help in our time of need. Whatever burdens you have, he wants you to bring them to him in prayer. Whatever is making you anxious, he wants you to pray and find peace. Whatever concerns you have for other people, he wants you to come to him and pray for them. He wants us to ask so we can receive good gifts from him.

The devotions this week encourage us to pray in every situation, for every need that comes before us whether that would be in making important decisions, asking for Christian workers to join in the harvest, praying for healing and

deliverance from danger, praying for opportunities to share the gospel and to have spiritual insight in our lives. These readings are meant to teach us to come to God first when we are in need – that prayer should be our first response. Prayer is a gift from God through which we have 24-hour access to our loving heavenly Father who can supply everything we need.

But the devotionals also point out a problem that is common for many of us when it comes to prayer – and that is that prayer is often not our first response to trouble, but our last resort. We often seek other solutions first and then pray as an afterthought. Perhaps you've experienced that in your life – I have to admit it's been true for me on many occasions. I can be very slow and even reluctant to ask for help. So we have this gift, but we often don't use it and I think it's important for us to address that this morning. Why don't we come to God as our first response in times of need? What are the barriers that hold us back? I want to bring up three possible reasons why we might struggle with prayer so we can overcome the barriers and seek God more eagerly and often.

I think one of the reasons people might not pray is simply that they just aren't aware of the privilege of prayer. Maybe they are new to the faith and new to the whole idea of prayer and communicating with God. There might be something in their background that holds them back. I know I've come across people who don't pray because they don't know they can. There can be this perception that there is a barrier between you and God – that you are unworthy, and in order to pray you have to go through some kind of intermediary like a priest or pastor or maybe even Mary or one of the Saints.

But the Bible teaches that this is not true. Because of what Christ has done for us, we can go directly to God in prayer. The book of Hebrews talks a lot about this and in Hebrews 10:19-22 it says, *“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus,²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh,²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God,²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.”*

Christ has opened the way for everyone who has faith in him to draw near to God even though we've committed sins against him. Jesus washes away our sins by his

blood and through his death on the cross he opened the way for us to draw near to God. All of us who are in Christ have been given the privilege of coming before the throne of grace to ask for help in our time of need. So if you think you are unworthy and unable to come before the Lord in prayer, know that in Jesus Christ, God does not hold our sins against us but listens with fatherly love. We have the same access to the Father as Jesus does, believe it or not!

Another reason we might not pray is that we have learned to be self-reliant people. When we run into an issue or problem, we have learned that we need to solve our own problems or find someone else who can help us and we only think of asking our heavenly father for help once these other options have failed. I spoke last week about a worldview that's pervasive in our culture that denies the spiritual and sees everything as physical, that there is no God, no miracles, no answers to prayer – which means we have to fend for ourselves in whatever problems we face.

And even though we may be Christians and don't really believe those things, we've still been conditioned to think that way. It plays right into our sinful nature that leads us to seek our own way and be independent from God. So we need to be transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we live in the awareness of God and his gift of prayer and desire to help us.

James was really hard on his readers because they had a very worldly mentality that was leading them to seek their own solutions to get what they wanted and not pray, and in James 4:1-2 he writes: *"What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? ² You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask."* They had a worldly mindset so they were seeking only their own solutions to get what they wanted rather than asking God. And even though we may not be as worldly and sinful as them, we can still carry around the underlying mentality of relying on ourselves rather than God.

So we need to humble ourselves before the Lord and ask the Holy Spirit to renew our minds so that we think first of going to God in prayer. By calling us to go to him, I think he wants us to learn to rely on him and see that he is the one who provides for all our needs. He often uses our own abilities or that of others to

meet our needs, but that strength and wisdom comes from him, and if we don't pray first, we totally miss that. I also think he wants us to come to him because there are times when we're asking for the wrong things and he uses prayer to transform our minds and thinking to become more like him. He wants us to be in ongoing, personal relationship with him where we learn to trust and depend on him.

But there is a third reason I think we neglect to go to God in prayer, and that is because we struggle with the reality of unanswered prayers. We may know that God wants us to pray and we might have learned to do that rather than automatically seeking our own solutions, but then we've been met with unanswered prayers. Perhaps we've prayed for healing in our lives or for someone else who has a debilitating or terminal illness and there wasn't a healing. Or perhaps there was some kind of relational conflict that we prayed about, maybe a difficult situation in a family or church or work or friendship, and instead of getting better, the situation got worse. Or perhaps there's a financial crisis that you prayed about and asked for help, but help didn't come.

These unanswered prayers aren't easy to deal with, especially as time goes on. At first we may go to Scripture and realize that our prayers weren't answered because we had selfish motives, or we're asking for worldly things, maybe we weren't praying in faith or in Jesus name. But we make those changes and we ask for things in faith that we know are good and align with God's will, and we are still met with unanswered prayers. And at least for me, this can be one of the biggest barriers to coming to God first in prayer.

As I was thinking about this this week and talking to several people, the thing that God brought to my mind was what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12. Paul had received glorious revelations about God and heaven, but he was forbidden to talk about them. So he had secret knowledge from God that would have significantly impacted his faith, only he was not allowed to tell anyone what it was. That kind of knowledge can easily produce spiritual pride, so God did something in Paul's life to prevent that. 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 says this: *"So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power*

is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

Paul was going through suffering. We don't know the symptoms, but we know some kind of messenger of Satan was harassing him and he was so desperate that he pleaded with God to take it away, much like we do in our suffering. He prayed about it repeatedly. And God did not give him what he asked for. I'm sure his suffering was limiting him in ministry and he was asking God to heal him so that he could be more effective. But for all we know, that suffering never went away until the day Paul died. God said “no” to those prayers. Why? God revealed to Paul that he was using that suffering to do something even better in Paul's life. He was making Paul weaker through suffering so that he wouldn't become conceited and so that God's power would be revealed in his life rather than Paul's power. Through his weakness, Christ would be glorified, not Paul. And Paul rejoiced in that. In fact, it was because of that, that he welcomed whatever suffering came his way.

God was using Paul's suffering to do something even better than what would have been accomplished through the removal of it. There are many passages that teach this. One of the clearest is James 1:2-4: *“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”* Trials and sufferings are one of the ways God produces good things in our lives – things that are even better than the removal of them.

Another example is what Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 1:8-10 *“For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. ⁹Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. ¹⁰He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again.”* This sounds like an even worse suffering for Paul – so bad that he thought he would die. But God used it to teach him to rely on him and he wouldn't have learned that any other way.

These are just a few examples of how God actually uses suffering in our lives to produce something good. Now think of this and how it relates to prayer. When we or someone else asks for prayer, it's usually to alleviate some kind of suffering. And God could do that. He could remove the suffering. But what if God is using it to actually do something deeper or more important in that person's life or in someone else who's being affected by it? Will God say "yes" to the request to remove that suffering? I don't think so. This was a big revelation for me this week and has changed the way I look at asking God for help.

I need to do more than just ask him to fix whatever problem I'm praying about. I need to understand that there's more going on than just the suffering – that God is working and using the difficulties and pain. Therefore I need to pray for faith for the person who's suffering and those affected by it, that they would believe that God is in it and using it for good. I need to pray that God would accomplish his good purposes for it and use it to bring people into greater alignment with his good plans and purposes. I need to pray that those who are suffering would desire the outcome of the suffering more than just the healing and that they would actually come to a point like Paul did where they rejoice in their suffering because of what God is doing. I think it's this kind of praying that God has in mind when he invites us to come to him rather than just hurrying through a list of prayer requests.

When we pray that way, I believe we will see answers. If someone is trusting God and rejoicing in their suffering, those are amazing answers to prayer because we don't just naturally do that. We doubt God and complain. If someone comes to a deeper understanding of how God is using their suffering, that's an amazing answer to prayer – something that only God can do. If we see God use the suffering to change someone's life and draw them nearer to him, that's an answer to prayer.

Yes, I think we should keep asking God to alleviate suffering because I think he wants to do that as well – sometimes he answers right away. I experienced an awesome answer to prayer just this week and it happened just 3 days after I prayed. Sometimes God just takes away the problem. But many times I think he's doing something deeper and uses the suffering to do so, and we need to let that influence our prayers.

God has invited us to come to him to participate in the blessing of prayer. I encourage you to fit it into the pattern of your life and learn to pray first and not just as a last resort. Perhaps you have identified one of these things that I've talked about that's a barrier to your prayers and I hope this message has encouraged you in some way to push beyond that barrier to commune more deeply with our heavenly Father.