

## Heart of Worship: Our Father in Heaven Hears and Answers His Children Here!

A sermon based on Matthew 7:9-11

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

There once was a small town that had historically been a "dry" town. But one day a local businessman decided to build a tavern and see how he could do. The local church organized a prayer meeting to ask God to intervene. That very night lightning struck the bar and it burned to the ground. The owner of the bar sued the church, claiming that the prayers of the congregation were responsible, but the church hired a lawyer to argue in court that they were not responsible. The presiding judge, after his initial review of the case, stated that "no matter how this case comes out, one thing is clear. The tavern owner believes in prayer and the Christians do not."

It's a funny anecdote, but is there a bit of truth to it? Does it seem sometimes that people out there, who would hardly call themselves Christians, put more belief in prayers being answered than we believers do?

Today, in our Heart of Worship sermon, we'll focus on prayer, as it shows up throughout our worship. We'll learn how we should pray, what we should pray for, and how God answers prayer. Every day millions of Christians begin their prayers with the familiar words "Our Father Who Art in Heaven..." And what comforting words those are. God is our Father. He resides in heaven and he's eager to hear and answer our prayers...his children's prayers. And he promises to answer them in a way that will bless us as our loving Father in heaven. Listen to Matthew 7:9-11, words Jesus spoke in his Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said,

***<sup>9</sup>"Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? <sup>10</sup>Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? <sup>11</sup>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!"***

Wow! That's a bit harsh isn't it? That Jesus calls us, his own children, evil? I mean, we're not perfect sure, but evil? Yes. Absolutely. Every one of us is evil. If you don't believe me, consider your prayer life.

In the movie, *Meet the Parents*, a young man is meeting his girlfriend's parents for the first time in order to ask for her hand in marriage. In one scene, they're gathered around the dinner table and the girl's father asks their guest to lead the prayer. He struggles for a minute or two trying to come up with the words to say and finally blurts out a rambling prayer with disjointed thoughts and a few lines from a 70's song.

Jonathan Edwards, an 18<sup>th</sup> century preacher, once said, "Prayer is as natural an expression of faith as breathing is of life." You see, there's no such thing as a Christian who doesn't pray any more than there is a Christian who doesn't do good works. Both are natural byproducts of who we are in Christ.

But perhaps, when you are asked to pray publicly, or even when you pray to God on your own, you feel more like that young man in *Meet the Parents* and don't really know what to say.

Or maybe you treat it like a spare tire? Something to be forgotten about until you're really in a bind. Then you pull it out, dust it off, and use it just long enough until everything's okay again so you can put it away until the next crisis? Imagine if the person who you loved most dearly in life never spoke a word to you. They gave you the silent treatment. If they did speak to you it was only if they really needed a favor and expected you to bail them out. How would you feel? Isn't that what we do to God sometimes?

Or imagine if Bill Gates were to give you a blank check and say, "Take however much you want." And you sat down to write out the check for \$2. Or worse yet, you tear it up and throw it away, because you don't believe he'll make good on his promise.

Jesus' brother, James, wrote in James 1(:5-8), ***"If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does."***

You see how your weak and feeble prayer life shows how evil you really are? If you were to tear up Bill Gate's blank check you could rightly expect him to withdraw his gracious offer to give you anything you asked and instead kick you out of his mansion never to contact *you* again. And for our rare prayers, for our selfish prayers looking only to have more of our wants met while others needs go unmet, for neglecting to pray for the spiritual blessings we need far more than any more physical stuff, we deserve to have God withdraw his offer to bless us or even let us communicate with him. We deserve to lose the privilege of prayer or to call him "Father." After all, we sure don't act like his children. We deserve to have him harm us with with stones and snakes, rather than bless us. We deserve hell.

And yet, in love for us, God still says, "You who are evil, call me Father. For that is what I am. Expect that I will continue to bless you." Why? How can he do this for us who are evil? Because of his grace. In his great love for us God gave us what we needed most. He didn't send a million dollars or that new mansion. Instead he sent a Savior, before you and I even knew we needed one.

In Isaiah 65(:1,17-19,24), he said, ***"I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on my name, I said, 'Here am I, here am I.' ...Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more... [And] Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear."***

Through Jesus and his perfect life in our place, and by his perfect sacrifice on the cross, you and I, who are by nature evil, are forgiven, sinless, and holy. We are made perfect by our baptisms and through the faith given us by the Spirit you and I are adopted into God's family! We are his dearly-loved children! He is our Father in heaven! John reminds us in 1 John 3:1, ***"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!"***

As Jesus encourages us to pray to our heavenly Father, his point is pretty clear, isn't it? Dads, when your children say they're hungry, do you give them a rock? Of course not. You may not give the candy bar they ask for, and you may make them wait until dinner time, but you give them the food they need,

when they need it, that their bodies might be nourished. And I'm guessing that most of you don't stop at just taking care of your kids needs. You give them many of their wants as well. Why do we do this? Because we love our kids. Now, if you and I who are inherently selfish take care of our children, how much more won't God, who is perfectly loving and selfless, take care of his children?! And does he ever take care of us! Much better than any earthly father ever could!

Where earthly fathers don't always know what their kids' real needs are, God is in heaven. He sees all things. He knows all things. He knows your needs and how best to provide for them. He's already provided for our greatest need by taking our sin, our neglect of his gifts of prayer, our rebellion against our heavenly Father and nailed it all to the cross. He's provided for our physical needs. None of us here are naked or starving. And who here can say he's given you none of your wants?

Where earthly fathers aren't always able to provide for their kids because they don't have the resources, our heavenly Father is in heaven. The whole world is his with everything in it. He has unlimited resources at his disposal. He can give you anything if he wants you to have it. Where earthly fathers can be selfish and unloving, our heavenly Father has a perfect love for us that will only give us what's best.

Keep that in mind; that's important. Our heavenly Father, in his perfect love, will only give us what's best. Let that shape your prayers to him. God doesn't always answer them with a "yes," but he does always answer them. There will be times when your heavenly Father won't give you what you want when he knows it's not best for you. And you may not understand why, especially when what you have – the cancer, the loneliness, the strained relationship, the hurt, the pain – when it doesn't seem to you to be in your best interest. God does, though. God understands. He knows his answers to your prayers will give you spiritual nourishment and strength that will far outlast this life.

So, how can we, his children, knowing all this...how can we pray to our Father, in worship here, yes, but in our daily lives as well? Listen to a couple verses before ours today, ***"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."***

The solution? Don't stop praying! Like the child who keeps nagging his parents, "Can I do this? Can I have this? Can I? Can I? Can I?"...until they finally give in and answer them...we can ask our heavenly Father with such courage and with persistence because of the gracious promises God gives. Jesus tells us to ask, seek and knock, but in the Greek these verbs are present tense. Perhaps a better translation would be ***"Keep on asking, keep on seeking, and keep on knocking."*** Why? Because he promises he'll respond. And he even repeats the promises in verse eight, ***"For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened."*** That's a powerful promise from God! He will answer our prayers in a way that's a blessing to us.

God, who loves us enough to send his own Son to hell in our place, be eager and willing and ready to jump at the chance to bless us? Paul reminds us in Romans 8(:32), ***"He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"***

What a privilege we have in Christ! With our every sin removed we can pray to God! What a blessing we have from him, knowing that no matter what we ask for, he will answer in a way that blesses us. What an encouragement we have to make full use of this awesome gift and boldly, persistently, pray to God, just like Abraham did in our first lesson.

A friend of mine shared the story of his young niece who was in the middle of potty training. After filling her Pull-Up® her father looked at her with a stern look and asked, "Why didn't you go in the potty?" With a sheepish look she asked, "Daddy, are you mad at me?" "Well, I'm not happy." To which she replied, "I have an idea, daddy." She went over to him, diaper still loaded, and pressed his hands together and said, "Dear Jesus, please help daddy not to be mad at me. Amen." She looked up and said, "There, daddy. Now are you mad at me?" (And, of course, her prayer worked.) J

You see, no matter how young or old, no matter who the audience, in Christ—with our every sin forgiven—we know our daddy isn't mad at us. So we can approach him boldly, confidently, and often. Let's make better use of that awesome gift of prayer. In Jesus' name, amen.