

## INTRODUCTION

As we look at the Parables and Miracles of Jesus recorded by Matthew, I'm including the colorful metaphors Jesus used to teach people about relating to God. I'm calling this "The Parable of Stones and Snakes," because Jesus paints the preposterous picture of a son asking his father for bread and a fish, and instead his father gives him a stone and a snake.

You've probably heard the question, "Why did the chicken cross the road?" Somebody sent me some humorous answers to that question given by famous people.

"The problem we have here is that this chicken won't realize that he must first deal with the problem on 'THIS' side of the road before it goes after the problem on the 'OTHER SIDE' of the road." — *Dr. Phil*

"Did the chicken cross the road? Did he cross it with a toad? Yes, the chicken crossed the road; but why it crossed I've not been told." — *Dr. Seuss*

"Imagine all the chickens in the world crossing roads together—in peace." — *John Lennon*

"Did the chicken really cross the road, or did the road move beneath the chicken?"  
— *Albert Einstein*

"I invented the chicken!" — *Al Gore*

"Did I miss one?" — *Colonel Sanders*

"I did not cross the road with THAT chicken." — *Bill Clinton*

"Why did the chicken cross the road?" really isn't an important question. But there is a question I've been asked hundreds of times since I've been a pastor, "Why aren't my prayers being answered?" If you stood before Jesus and asked Him that question I think His answer might be, "Because you stop praying too soon." We're going to learn from Jesus' words recorded in Matthew 7:7-12 that there is great power in persistent praying.

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? 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! So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets."

I've always been fascinated by prayer and I'm still a student in God's school of prayer. I've accumulated hundreds of great quotes about prayer and these are some of my favorites.

"You can do more than pray AFTER you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray

UNTIL you have prayed.” — *A.J. Gordon*

“Satan laughs at our toiling, mocks at our wisdom, but trembles when we pray.”  
— *Watchman Nee*

“Prayer is not overcoming God’s reluctance, but laying hold of His willingness.”  
— *Martin Luther*

“Is prayer your steering wheel or your spare tire?” — *Corrie ten Boom*

Jesus was a great teacher and a wonderful healer, but we never read that His disciples ever said, “Lord, teach us to heal, or teach us how to teach.” But we read that they asked Him, “Lord, teach us to pray.” There was something about the prayer life of Jesus that caused his disciples to want to pray the way He prayed. Let’s learn three lessons Jesus teaches us about prayer:

### **1. IF AT FIRST YOU DON’T GET AN ANSWER, THEN PRAY, PRAY AGAIN!**

Jesus said, “Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.” The New Testament was written in the Koine Greek language, which has many more nuances than English. The tense Jesus used for “Ask, seek, and knock” is called the present imperative which literally means: “Ask—and keep on asking; Seek—and keep on seeking; Knock and keep on banging on heaven’s door.”

The reason more prayers don’t seem to be answered is that people stop praying. A little boy named Bobby asked his dad if he could pray for God to give him a puppy. His mom was expecting a new baby, so his dad said, “Not now, son, but why don’t you pray and ask God for a little baby brother? That’s a prayer that God will answer in a couple of months.” Bobby prayed for a couple of weeks, but nothing happened so he stopped praying. A couple of months later Bobby’s mom went into the hospital. Bobby came to visit his mother after she had delivered and his dad pulled the cover back to reveal not one baby brother but two—twins. The daddy said to Bobby, “Son, aren’t you glad that you prayed and asked God for a baby brother?” Bobby said, “Sure, dad, but aren’t you glad I stopped praying when I did!”

I can honestly remember my first experience with prayer as a child. I went to first grade Sunday School and my teacher taught us that if we asked God for something He would give it to us. That got my attention, because it sounded like a good deal. At this time my family was living in Dothan, Alabama, which is located just a few miles from Fort Rucker where the army trains all their helicopter pilots. So every day dozens flew over our house. Whenever I heard one I would run outside and wave my arms for them to land and take me for a ride. My favorite television show was “Whirlybirds,” which was a show about policemen who used a helicopter to catch criminals.

More than anything else I wanted to fly in a helicopter, so after I heard that Sunday School lesson, I decided I would see if prayer really worked. One night I got on my knees and said, “Okay, God, my teacher told me I could ask you for something and you’d give it to me. I want a real helicopter to land behind my house in the empty field, and I want to get in fly it over our

neighborhood. My teacher had said to be specific in my prayers, so I even described what kind of helicopter I wanted it to be. "God, make it one of the small ones with the glass bubble that carries two people." I can tell you with all honesty that I got into bed that night with simple childlike faith fully expecting God to answer my prayer. The next morning, I got up and dressed to go on a helicopter ride, because I totally expected there to be a helicopter in the field behind my house. I ran out my back door and looked at the vacant field. Would you believe that earlier that morning an army helicopter had made an emergency landing and was sitting in that field? I didn't say there was one there, I just asked you if you would believe it: Don't. At first I remember thinking, "This prayer thing isn't all it's cracked up to be." But as I grew older God used that first prayer experience to teach me lessons about how to pray.

I've since come to understand that God answers *every* prayer. Allow me to share with you four different ways that God answers prayer:

### **(1) When the request is wrong, He says, "No."**

God knew it wouldn't have been the greatest idea for a six-year-old kid to try to fly a helicopter, so he just said "No." But "no" is an answer.

Sometimes we ask for the wrong things, things we think we really want or need, and our Father knows best. He knows those things we're asking for might even be harmful to us. Most Texans remember that classic song by Garth Brooks where he sang about his high school sweetheart that he asked God to let him marry. Years later he's happily married to another woman when he sees his high school girlfriend and he sings, "I thank God for unanswered prayer." Garth's a great songwriter, but his prayer theology is a little off—that prayer wasn't unanswered. God just said, "No." We should be glad God doesn't give us everything we ask for.

Are there some things in your life you asked for? You might have even asked God persistently, but over time you came to realize God's answer was simply, "No."

Often, when God says "no" to one thing, He has something better in mind. Paul had a thorn in the flesh and he begged God to take it away—not once, not twice, but three times. God said, "Paul, I'm not going to take that thorn away, but I'm going to give you something better. I'm going to shower you with my grace, and you'll find that my strength is made perfect in your weakness."

### **(2) When the timing is wrong, He says "Slow."**

The problem with some of our prayers is we want to God to answer our prayers RIGHT NOW! But God is more interested in timing than in time. Is there something you've been praying about for a long time, and it seems that heaven is silent? It could be God is waiting for the perfect timing to answer your prayer. Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus to come and help their brother Lazarus because he was sick. Jesus intentionally delayed until Lazarus died. Mary and Martha were upset at Jesus' delay, but Jesus came in His own time. By raising Lazarus from the dead, He was able to give God even greater glory than healing him of sickness. Just remember, God's delays are not God's denials. Ask and keep on asking, and then wait on the Lord's perfect

timing.

### **(3) When you're not ready, He says "Grow!"**

Sometimes the request is right and the timing is right, but we're not right with God, so He tells us to grow. Psalm 66:18 says, "If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened." That doesn't mean that God can't hear your prayer, it means He isn't answering because we aren't in a spiritual condition to receive His answer.

Ray Stedman told the story about growing up as a kid on a ranch. One day he stole one of his dad's cigars and slipped around the side of barn to smoke it. He heard his dad calling his name as he walked toward where he was standing. Ray quickly tried to put out the cigar and hide it behind his back. His dad said, "Son, do you want to ride with me into town?" Ray said, "Sure, dad!" His dad sniffed the air and said, "Ray, have you been smoking one of my cigars?" Ray shook his head and said, "Oh, no sir." Ray didn't realize that his dad could see the smoke from the cigar rising up behind his back. His dad said, "Son, you'd better not expect me to do you any favors as long there is smoldering evidence of your disobedience behind your back." Ray said he didn't get to go into town, and he never stole another of his dad's cigars.

Can you relate to that? Maybe you're begging God for something, and He sees you're trying to hide smoldering disobedience behind your back. We don't have to be sinless and perfect for God to answer our prayers, or none of us would qualify. But we must be willing to be honest and open before the Lord before we ask Him for His favors.

### **(4) When all the factors are right, He says "Go!"**

When you ask something that is in God's will and the timing is right and you're in a proper condition to receive the answer God says, "Go claim your answer." In Luke 7 we read about a Roman Centurion came to Jesus and asked Him to heal one of his servants. Jesus said, "Where is he?" The Centurion said, "Oh, you don't need to go to where he is, you and I both understand authority. Just speak the word and he will be healed." Jesus marveled at this man's faith and said, "Go. You'll find your servant healed when you get there."

Remember my helicopter prayer? It's funny but about twenty years after I prayed that prayer I was in seminary working at an airport in Louisville, Ky. An army helicopter landed and after I refueled it the pilot asked me if I wanted to ride as he relocated the helicopter to another location on the airport. I accepted his offer, and as we were lifting off, I couldn't help but remember praying that prayer as a child. I finally got to ride in an army helicopter! God answers every prayer, so if at first you don't see an answer, Ask and keep on asking, seek and keep on seeking, knock and keep on knocking.

## **2. PRAYER IS ABOUT IMPROVING YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD NOT JUST RECEIVING THINGS**

I call this the parable of stones and snakes, because Jesus employed hyperbole to present the cruel scenario of a hungry child asking his earthly father for bread. And instead, the father gives

his son a stone. In Israel, there are thousands of round dark rocks that would look almost identical to a small loaf of barley bread. What a cruel hoax to give a child a rock that looks like a loaf of bread! Fish was the main staple for people living in that region, because the Sea of Galilee is a freshwater lake teeming with fish. But for Jews a snake was not kosher meat. How unlikely for a father to give his child a slimy, unclean snake when they asked for a fish. The teaching point of this unusual parable is found in verse eight. Jesus said, "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!"

Jesus wasn't saying all earthly dads are evil. He was making a comparison. I've tried to be a good dad, but compared to absolute goodness of my Heavenly Father, my goodness looks more like evil than good. I have always tried to be generous and give my two daughters everything they've needed and even a lot of things they didn't need but they wanted. But compared to God's generosity, I come across as stingy and tight-fisted as Ebenezer Scrooge.

Prayer isn't primarily about asking God to give us the things we want or think we need. Prayer is about entering into a personal relationship with God and getting to know Him better and better. And as you get to know God better, you discover He is a perfect Father who loves you so much that He wants to shower you with good gifts. The more you commune with Him, the more you discover our Father is a good God who fills your cup until it overflows.

Oswald Chambers said, "Prayer is not simply getting things from God, it is getting into perfect communion with God. We hear it said that a man will suffer in his life if he does not pray; I question it. What WILL suffer is the life of the Son of God within him, which is nourished not by food but by prayer."

I've met people through the years who are intimidated with prayer because they are afraid they aren't using the right words or praying in the right way. Prayer is just talking to God the same way a child talks to his or her Father. Have you ever wondered why God put you on this planet? I'm going to be brave enough to answer that question for you. God created you so you could have a loving, personal relationship with Him. We know that from reading the first pages of the Bible. God created Adam and Eve and placed them in a beautiful garden. The Bible says God walked and talked with them in the cool of the evening. That's what prayer is. When God arrived for their visit, Adam didn't hand God a shopping list and say, "Okay, here's my list. We need a few more songbirds in those trees over there, and could you remove those alligators in the river? Eve is afraid of them. And while you're at it, would you make Eve talk a little less?" You may laugh, but for most people that's what prayer is—asking for good things, asking God to take away bad things, and asking God to change other people.

But Adam didn't give God a shopping list. He just communed with Him because he realized his Creator loved him so much He would supply everything he needed. That's what prayer should be for us. Sharing our heart with our Father and listening as He speaks to us. The only way you can build a relationship with someone is to spend time with them. So is your prayer life more about handing a shopping list to God, or spending time with Him so you can know Him in a deeper, more intimate way?

Austin Mill's song "In the Garden" is really about prayer. Does this describe your prayer life? "I come to the garden alone; while the dew is still on the roses; and the voice I hear falling on my ear; the Son of God discloses; And He walks with me and He talks with me; and He tells me I am His own; And the joy we share as we tarry there; none other has ever known."

### 3. PRAYER CHANGES THINGS? MOSTLY, PRAYER CHANGES YOU

Maybe you've seen the bumper sticker that says, "Prayer changes things." That's okay, but I've discovered it's more accurate to say "Prayer changes people." The point of every message isn't to get you to just understand something; it's to motivate you to DO something. Every parable of Jesus has a "so what" attached to it. You may be surprised to find that after Jesus teaches on prayer in the next breath He adds what is often called "the Golden Rule" in verse 12: "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you."

The American version of "The Golden Rule" is "He who has the gold makes the rules." We saw that clearly this past week when Donald Trump, who owns the Miss America Beauty Pageant made the final decision about whether or not Carrie Prejean can keep her Miss California crown because of some racy photos taken of her. The Donald said, "Yes, she can." When I saw that I thought, "Things have gotten so bad in America that now Donald Trump is our moral policeman." "You're fired. You're hired. You're wrong. You're right." God help us. But the golden rule ISN'T the one with the most gold makes the rules.

The Golden Rule is greatly misunderstood in our world. Some people think it's a formula for getting into heaven. Ask some people if they're going to heaven and they say, "Well, I try to treat others the way I want to be treated." This isn't a formula for salvation. It's a description of how God's children will act like our heavenly Dad by showing them the same kindness that He has shown us.

Jesus is saying the more time you spend with God in prayer you learn that God treats each of us NOT the way we deserve to be treated, but He treats us the way we need to be treated. Some misguided people look at their adversity and shake their fist toward heaven and said, "I don't deserve to be treated this way! I deserve better than this!" I never say that, because I don't want God to treat me the way I deserve to be treated. In fact, my standard reply to anyone who asks me how I'm doing is to say, "I'm doing better than I deserve." I am a sinner and I deserve death and hell. But God showed kindness and grace toward me. Grace is God giving me what I *need* not what I *deserve*. The golden rule was born in God's heart, because we read in Romans 5:8 "God demonstrates his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

One of my favorite verses is Psalm 37:4 which says, "Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart." I had a friend in college who was studying for the ministry show me that verse with great excitement. He said, "God knows that I really desire a Corvette to drive, so I'm going to delight myself in the Lord and He's going to give me a Corvette—a red one!" I didn't want to discourage him, so I just said, "Good for you!" He prayed and prayed for months and one day I saw him in the dorm parking lot pulling up in a used Chevrolet Vega with a faded paint job. I said, "What happened to your Corvette?" He smiled and said, "The more I delighted in the Lord, He changed the desire of my heart to anything that would get me around."

What a great lesson. Prayer is more of a relationship than a request. When you have a desire, keep coming to God; keep asking; keep seeking; keep knocking—don't stop. And as you spend more and more time with Him, your heart will become like His heart and His desires will become your desires. The more time we spend in intimate fellowship with God, the more His desires become your desires.

## CONCLUSION

During the Civil War, a confederate soldier was killed in battle. As they were preparing to dispose of his body, they found a folded piece of paper in his pocket that contained a testimony about prayer. We don't know if the soldier wrote this, or if it was written by someone else, but it is a powerful statement about letting God's desires become our desires. It said: "I asked for strength that I might achieve; He made me weak that I might obey. I asked for health that I might do great things; He gave grace that I might do better things. I asked for riches that I might be happy; He did not give them so that I might be wise. I asked for power that I might have the praise of men; I was given weakness that I might feel a need of God. I asked for all things that I might enjoy life; I was given life, that I might enjoy all things. I received very few of the things I asked for; But I received the things I had hoped for."

Trust God. Commune with Him in persistent prayer. God always chooses the best for those who leave the choice to Him.

## OUTLINE

### 1. IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T GET AN ANSWER, THEN PRAY, PRAY AGAIN!

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."

#### GOD ANSWERS EVERY PRAYER:

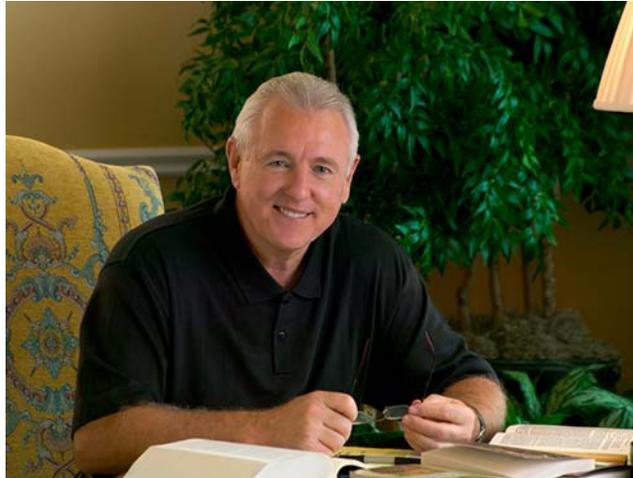
- (1) When the request is wrong, He says, "No."
- (2) When the timing is wrong, He says "Slow."
- (3) When you're not ready, He says "Grow!"
- (4) When all the factors are right, He says "Go!"

### 2. PRAYER IS ABOUT IMPROVING YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD NOT JUST RECEIVING THINGS

"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!"

### 3. PRAYER CHANGES THINGS? MOSTLY, PRAYER CHANGES YOU

"So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you."



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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes