

# “Three Levels of Prayer”

A sermon by  
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**TEXT: Matthew 7:7-11 and 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18**

## **Matthew 7:7-11**

*‘Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!*

## **1 Thessalonians 5:16-18**

*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

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As many of you know, our son, Andrew, is a business owner. He is the District Manager for Cutco/Vector, a company that recruits and trains high school and college students to sell knives and kitchen accessories. I know that many of you have Cutco knives in your kitchen. I also know that some of you have had children or grandchildren who sold Cutco during their college years.

This introduction is not a shameless plug for Cutco knives. I want you to think about their business model in terms of Jesus’s teaching on prayer in Matthew 7:7-11. I never realized it, but Cutco sales people use the ASK, SEEK, KNOCK model that Jesus teaches regarding prayer. You see, recruits are not allowed to “cold call” anyone. They do not go door-to-door hoping to find someone at home who will consider a purchase. They do not approach random strangers and ask if they need a knife. I’m pretty sure that would end with arrest and incarceration. Instead, recruits are asked to develop a list of everyone they or their parents might know. The recruit then calls each of these persons and ASKS for an opportunity to do a demonstration. The company knows that if a recruit can make an appointment and give a complete demonstration as they are trained to do, there is a good chance the customer will buy something.

Even if they do not sell anything, they are taught to SEEK other contacts from the person who has just seen the demonstration. It is done by asking a simple question, “Could you give me the names of several friends or relatives who might be interested in seeing these products?”

Finally, even if an appointment is made, a Cutco rep can never sell anything if they do not KNOCK and follow up when an appointment has been made. It requires being physically present to do a demonstration. No sales are ever made over the phone.

‘Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.’ Ask. Seek. Knock. This is Jesus’ instruction on prayer. Let’s look at each one.

**ASK---IF YOU NEVER ASK, YOU NEVER RECEIVE**

Smith Wigglesworth, an English plumber who became a great preacher and revivalist in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century once wrote, "God is more eager to answer than we are to ask." Jesus invites his disciples to ask. In John 14:13-14, Jesus says, "*I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.*" James, the half-brother of Jesus writes in James 4:2b-3, "*You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.*"

We are invited to ask, but it is important to ask rightly. Our asking should be guided by one consideration. Is what I am asking something I can or should ask "in Jesus' name"?

If you ask a stranger for a favor, there is always some doubt about receiving what you have requested. However, if you ask your father, or your wife, or your brother, you have some degree of confidence that they will provide what you need if it is in their power to give it.

This is Jesus' point when he says, "*Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!*"

God desires that we ask because God is more eager to answer than we are to ask. The problem is ours. We do not ask. In fact, the Greek translation indicates that this passage should really be translated, "Ask and keep on asking. . . seek and keep on seeking . . . knock and keep on knocking."

I had a young woman in one of the congregations I served who once mentioned that she never prayed for herself or for things she needed in her life. I asked her why. Her response was that God had better things to do considering the condition of the world than to listen to and answer her paltry and self-centered prayers.

Now that may sound very humble, but it doesn't synch with what Scripture commands. The Apostle Paul in Philippians 4:6 writes, "*Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.*"

In other words, ASK AND KEEP ON ASKING! Few prayers are answered the first time we ask. Prayer begins with faithfully trusting Jesus' words and asking God for what we need. It continues by trusting that when we do ask, God will fulfill the promise. Such fulfillment does not depend upon us. We only come before God as beggars. The fulfillment of prayer is based entirely on the character and person of God.

Martin Luther once wrote, "Pray as if everything depends upon God, then work as if everything depends upon you."

### **SEEK---TO DISCOVER GOD'S WILL**

Asking is important. However, it is also important to know how to ask rightly. Asking requires faith. Faith requires knowledge and wisdom.

When you seek something, you acknowledge its importance and value. You willingly make sacrifices, rearrange your priorities, and alter your calendar to give prime place to the thing you seek.

You need to know what you should pray for, and so you seek to learn God's will.

When I was at St. Giles Cathedral Church in Edinburgh, the Presbyterian Mother Church, I discovered a bronze crypt and memorial bronze frieze dedicated to Robert Louis Stevenson, the Scottish poet and novelist. There is a wonderful story about Stevenson as a boy. Stevenson once remarked to his mother, "Momma, you can't be good without praying." "How do you know, Robert?" she asked. "Because I've tried!" he answered.

This recalls a similar story about another little fellow -- one who had been sent to his room because he had been bad. A short time later he came out and said to his mother, "I've been thinking about what I did, and I said a prayer." "That's fine," she said, "if you ask God to make you good, He will

help you." "Oh, I didn't ask Him to help me be good," replied the boy. "I asked Him to help you put up with me." (Our Daily Bread, June 15)

It is just as important to know what to pray for and how to pray as it is to ask. Such prayer requires that we seek to understand God's will. Jesus' half-brother James writes, *"If any of you is lacking wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given to you. But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord."* (James 1:5-8)

We must ask in faith. We must also seek knowledge and wisdom in faithful prayer.

Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. He knew what awaited him the next day. The cross stood before him as a giant, ominous shadow. He prayed that God would take this cup of suffering and sacrifice from him. Jesus prayed that the cross would not be necessary. The result of that prayer was clarity. He asked for what he desired. However, he submitted to the will of God. He put all his trust and faith in His Father to bring good out of evil and light out of darkness.

The Apostle Paul talks about his "thorn in the flesh" in Second Corinthians 12. He says that he had been given marvelous visions and revelations by God. He writes, *"Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated."* (2 Corinthians 12:7)

We do not know what that thorn might have been. Some have speculated that it had something to do with his eyesight, a residual effect of the blinding light at his conversion on the Damascus Road that left him blinded for three days. Some have speculated that it was some form of epilepsy. We do not know what it was, but we do know that it hindered Paul's ministry. We do know that he implored God to remove this thorn from him.

Paul asked. God didn't answer his requests.

Sometimes we ask. Sometimes the answer is "No!" even though what we have asked is seemingly within God's will. That is when we need wisdom. That is when we require understanding.

When Paul didn't get what he asked, he began to seek wisdom. Paul began seeking to understand why. It was only after seeking that he arrived at an answer. He writes, *"Three times appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'"* (2 Corinthians 12:8)

When we truly seek and keep on seeking God's will, we just may discover that the very thing we have made a matter of prayer is not given to us because God has something better that we would never think of asking.

A farmer near London wrote to the Scripture Gift Mission enclosing a five-shilling (\$1.25) offering during the 'Baby Blitz' in World War II. In his letter he requested prayer that no bombs should drop on his small farm. His harvest had not been good, and his farm was very dry, with no water, and he had to buy water he really could not afford. The secretary of the Mission wrote back and said he could not pray that prayer, but instead would pray that God's will might be done.

Soon after receiving the reply to his request Hitler's biggest bomb, a V-1 rocket came down on this man's farm. It broke all his windows, but no one was hurt. It was so big that it went down very deep into the ground and unearthed a natural spring. The spring not only watered the man's farm well, but it enabled him to give water to neighboring farmers, too. The following year, therefore, he had a very good harvest, and he sent a fifty-pound check as a thanksgiving offering. The Lord had done "exceeding abundantly above all" he asked or thought. (William Moses Tidwell, "Pointed Illustrations")

Ask and keep on asking. Why? Because asking indicates trust. Seek and keep on seeking. Why? Because seeking gives clarity to our asking.

**KNOCK---NEVER GIVE UP!**

I have always loved jokes, riddles, and humorous stories, in general. I remember well the “knock-knock” joke from elementary school. Right now, I’ll share my favorite with you.

[Would you like to hear a knock-knock joke? Okay, you start it . . . ]

Knocking indicates the persistence and perseverance with which we should pray. I must admit, I can be very casual and lackadaisical in my own prayer life. Sometimes I can be very focused. At other times, my thoughts are scattered, and my efforts are less than stellar. I’m pretty sure Jesus’ words here are for me, but you can listen in.

Before Christmas every season, my Scout Troop sold inexpensive gifts to allow us to raise money for summer camp. We were to go door-to-door after we had hit up our families and close relatives. Most members of the troop didn’t. Mom and dad would just cut a check and be done with it. My mom and dad didn’t have a lot of extra cash, so that wasn’t an option. Besides, as my dad said in many later situations, it would be a learning experience.

Oh, did I mention that we lived in the country and driveways were anywhere from 300 feet to a half a mile apart? I picked a Saturday in early December for my foray into direct sales. Snow flurries were falling. It was cold. I hit one side of the road we lived on and garnered a few sympathy sales. I turned up a side road. Ten houses and three sales. I had sold approximately thirty dollars of merchandise all morning.

I was just about to turn around and go home when I spotted it. Ahead, about a quarter of a mile farther down the road was a brand-new house. It was a little nicer than most of the houses I had visited so far. There were two Cadillac Coupe de Villas in the driveway. The lights were on. Christmas music was playing on the stereo. The snow began to fall harder.

I mustered up my courage and knocked on the door. Nothing. I knocked again. Nothing. I kept knocking. I knocked harder. I pounded. Suddenly the door opened and a rather angry looking Italian-American gentlemen stood in front of me, cocktail in hand. He was somewhat taken aback. “Can I help you?”

With my best sad puppy-dog look, I held out my cardboard suitcase and said something like, “Sir, I am a Boy Scout in Troop 46 trying to earn my way to summer camp by selling these cheaply made and overpriced Christmas baubles and trinkets. Could I interest you in some gifts for your family?” I paused.

“Where are you from, kid?” he asked.

“I live on the Ellwood Road near the Halfway Inn.”

“Kid, that’s almost three miles from here. How did you get here?”

“I walked.”

“How will you get home? Will your dad come and pick you up?”

“No. He’s at work. I’ll just walk.

“In this snow?” he asked incredulously. By now the snow was falling at about two inch per hour rate.

“Yes, sir.” I responded.

He invited me in. I opened my suitcase. I had only made about thirty dollars all day. At this house, I made an additional \$40.00! I am not ashamed to say that I gladly will take “pity money” if it is freely offered.

That year I went to summer camp for a week. My parents paid nothing. Dad was right. It was a valuable learning experience.

I learned the power of persistence. What if I had never gone to that next house? What if I had never knocked on the door? What if I hadn’t kept on knocking and knocking until someone answered? What if I had just given up?

The results spoke for themselves.

Why would God require us to persist in prayer; to keep asking, to keep seeking, to keep knocking? I believe it is because God wants to remind us of our great need without him. I also believe it is so

that we may focus on the One who to whom we pray, making Him the object and end of our prayers. In that way, we will not make the thing for which we pray, or the situation for which we pray, or even the person for whom we pray, the object of our prayers.

God alone is the One we should seek.

St. John Chrysostom wrote, "I prayed for many things and was not heard. For even this occurs to your advantage. Since God realizes that you lose heart and are indolent, and that when you attain what you need, you depart and no longer pray, God protects you with the pretext of need so that you may concern yourself with Him more closely and devote yourself to prayer."

*"Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"*

Ask and keep on asking. Seek and keep on seeking. Knock and keep on knocking.

The request will be met. The thing you seek will be found. The door will open, and you will find entry. How do I know?

Jesus promised.

Soli Deo Gloria. To God alone be the glory. AMEN.