

SUNDAY, JANUARY 31, 2010

Sunday, January 31, 2010: God's Generosity

God's Generosity
Matthew 7: 7 - 12

I. Introduction.

Earlier this month, we visited my parents in Tupelo, Mississippi. Most of our time in Mississippi was spent in Tupelo with my parents and my brother's family. But, one day, we went to Corinth to see my grandmother in the nursing home and to eat supper with all my cousins on my mother's side of the family.

This was probably the first time in ten years that I had been in the same place with my cousins Eddie and Mark at the same time. Eddie, Mark and I were born within about six months of each other. We spent a lot of time together at family gatherings and probably got into trouble together.

In the restaurant, my Aunt Helen pulled out an old picture of me with my cousins, Eddie and Mark. She lined us up and "recreated" the picture. Except, in the picture we were about one year old. And, we were all dressed alike. We were all wearing the overalls our grandparents had just given us.

Of course, these were no ordinary overalls. These were "Tuff Nut" overalls. Perhaps it was a regional brand, because not many people in Texas seem to know about "Tuff Nut" jeans and overalls.

What made Tuff Nut overalls special was the fact that they came with a pocket knife. As I grew older, that Tuff Nut knife became my prized possession. I didn't get to play with it or to carry it around. (I don't even think I was strong enough to open it without my dad's helping me.) But, I loved that knife...Until, one day...Tragedy struck. I lost my Tuff Nut knife.

That night, in our family devotion, I started praying that I would find my "Tuff Nut" knife. I listed it on our prayer calendar to pray for every night until I was able to find it. And I found it.

My mother said that I prayed for it every night for about three months until we finally found it. But remembering it through the mind of a child, it seemed more like two years. We marked it off the prayer calendar, and I will always remember the time I learned what it meant to have a prayer answered.

My Tuff Nut knife is special to me, because it represents the first time in my life when I felt like God answered my prayers. I was six years old.

Do you have a vivid memory of an answered prayer? Perhaps there was a time that you prayed daily for God's guidance in a decision you were about to make, and he responded by showing you the right choice.

But what about the other side of that story? Have you ever experienced the pain that goes with an unanswered prayer? How did you respond? Did you think that maybe you weren't a very good Christian? That maybe you failed to show enough faith to deserve having your prayer answered?

Jesus addressed this problem in his teachings on prayer in Matthew chapter 7. Let's look at what he teaches us about prayer and then turn our attention to the problem of unanswered prayer.

Read Matthew 7: 7 – 12.

II. What Is Prayer?

Webster's dictionary defines prayer as: "A humble communication in thought or speech to God or an object of worship expressing supplication, thanksgiving, praise, confession, etc. . ."

This doesn't help me a lot because I will have to define several other words in order to understand what the definition means. Let's use Jesus' words to define prayer.

The first thing I notice about Jesus' words is the fact that he gives us three commands: "Ask, Seek, Knock." The second thing I notice is that these three commands are written as Present Imperatives. (I have said this so many times over the past few weeks, that most of you will know where I am going with this.)

The present tense in Greek is used to describe continuous action. Therefore, we can translate Jesus' commands to us as: "Keep on asking...Keep on seeking...Keep on knocking..."

Jesus is not describing a one time event, or a once a week event, or even a once a day event. Jesus is describing prayer as something that we do continuously. It is a lifestyle of "Asking, Seeking and Knocking."

Another interesting thing about Jesus' commands is the fact that there are no objects to any of the verbs. Jesus does not specify that for which we are to ask, to seek or to knock. This leaves the discussion very broad. We can find some good possibilities by looking back at Jesus' words in the Model Prayer. On one hand, we are supposed to pray for our "daily bread." On the other hand, we are supposed to pray for "God's Kingdom to come" and "God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Therefore, Prayer can be for just about anything from the miraculous (Kingdom of God) to the mundane (bread for today). From the request of God acting on behalf of a sick loved one to the request for provision or guidance.

We also notice that there is no mention of faith. Jesus does not say ask with faith, seek with faith, or knock with faith. Instead, Jesus said anyone who asks, seeks, knocks will receive, find, have it open. This is not to discount our faith, but to shift the focus to God and his faithfulness and generosity toward us. Prayer does not depend on my faith, but the faithfulness and the generosity of the one on whom I put my trust. It's better to have small faith in a great God than great faith in small god.

"Asking, Seeking and Knocking" have something in common. The person who asks is lacking something. The person who seeks has lost something. The person who knocks has been shut out. All three of these people are needy people. Therefore, prayer is something only needy people are willing to do.

This is my personal definition of prayer: Total dependence on God. This is also why we do not pray. We do not like to think that we need to go outside of ourselves for anything. Much less our very existence. So, what is prayer?

It is childlike dependence on God for anything, from the miraculous to the mundane, and is not based on our faith, but the faithfulness of the one on whom we depend.

III. Why We Pray.

This is not the first time Jesus has taught us about prayer in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 6, Jesus gave us both a teaching about prayer and a Model for how to pray. Jesus closed his teaching with these words: **“Do not be like them (the hypocrites and the pagans), for your Father knows what you need before you ask him (Matthew 6: 8).”**

If God already knows what we need before we even ask him, then why do we need to pray? Obviously, the reason is not that God needs to know what we lack. Obviously, the reason we pray has more to do with us than it has to do with God.

For example, God knows what we need. However, there are times when we don't know what we need. There are other times when we know what we need, but we are not yet ready to receive it from God. Prayer is the way we learn what we need and we become ready to receive what God wants to give us.

In the passage, Jesus gives us an illustration of childlike dependence on a parent. This illustration demonstrates why people pray.

People who pray admit that they cannot survive on their own power and therefore must ask for outside help. People who do not pray claim to know better than God. They think they are independent and have no need for outside help. This is very American, but not very Christian at all.

This question brings us face to face with the question of God's sovereignty. In other words, do my prayers affect the outcome of the universe or is the course of the universe determined and my prayers just an exercise in futility? If our prayers do not matter, then we will have a difficult time explaining why we are to pray and why Jesus himself prayed. We know that it is not in God's character to change. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Therefore, we do not pray in order to change God's mind. We pray so that we might change. If prayer is to communicate as Webster tells us, then it is to enter into the presence of God with our requests. When we encounter God, face to face, we realize the areas in our own lives that are contradictory to the character and nature of God. Then, we change those areas. We conform to God's image.

In other words, when we encounter the one upon whom we depend, we change so that God's will becomes our will; God's love becomes our love; and God's desires become our desires.

IV. The Problem of Unanswered Prayer.

Now, let's turn to the problem of unanswered prayer...

I have always heard the explanation that there is no such thing as unanswered prayer. God answers all prayers: “Yes,” “No,” or “Not Yet.”

In our text, Jesus never tells us exactly what we will receive, find, or what will open for us. In some

English translations the phrase “what you asked for” appears, making the text say something like “Ask and you will receive what you asked for.” But that is not in the Greek text.

The text literally says, “Ask and to you will be given; Seek and you will find; Knock and to you will be opened.” We are never promised that we will get what we asked for. Jesus simply promises that we will receive something.

Then Jesus describes what this “something” is by giving an illustration. It is an illustration of what happens when children make requests of their parents. I can just hear the humor in this story. What parent would try to trick his or her child by giving them something that would harm them?

On our best days, we will do everything in our power to give our children what they need and what is best for them. If we, being sinful, give our children good things, how much more might God, who is without sin. And, God knows better than we do anyway.

The illustration is a promise that when we ask we will receive a “Good Gift,” when we seek we will find a “Good Gift,” when we knock a “Good Gift” will be opened to us. Even though we do not know what these “Good Gifts” are, we can be assured that if they come from the Father, they will be “Good Gifts.”

The fact is that what we often interpret as being unanswered prayer is really nothing more than simply not getting what we asked for. Often we ask for what is not in our best interest, and the Grace of God prevents us from suffering from our prayers being answered. We can rest assured that the Father only gives Good Things, and if we didn’t get it, then it wasn’t a Good Thing.

Other times, our prayers are influenced by our own sinfulness. Instead of asking for what is in the heart of God, we ask for what is in our own heart. Our prayers seem to go unanswered b/c we do not know what Good Thing God desires to give us.

There are some who would say that unanswered prayer is the result of our own lack of faith or that we did not call on the name of Jesus. I challenge that by returning our attention to Jesus’ own prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. Our own Savior experienced what seemed like unanswered prayer, but look at the Good Thing that the father gave instead. God gave the “Good Gift” that is the Good News. That Jesus died and was raised on the 3rd day so that you and I might have Eternal Life.

V. Conclusion: The Golden Rule.

Jesus concludes this teaching on prayer with a familiar verse we know as the Golden Rule. Verse 12 begins with the word “therefore”—telling us that it is somehow connected to the teaching before it. (The NIV does not use the word “therefore.” It uses the word “so.”)

This tells me that Jesus is teaching us to treat other people the way God treats us. God gives us “good gifts,” and never something dangerous or malicious.

God is good. God is faithful. God is generous. This is demonstrated in our prayer life. And, it should be revealed in the way we relate to others.

Prayer is one of those subjects that is very easy to talk about philosophically without ever being effected in our own religious experience. In other words, we believe a lot about prayer but would have a difficult time proving it to those who know us well.

If prayer really is “childlike dependence on God for anything, from the miraculous to the mundane, not based on human faith, but upon the faithfulness of the one on whom we depend,” then we should exhibit this dependence in all areas of our lives.

Prayer should not become something we do in times of need or at night before we go to bed. Instead, we should adopt a lifestyle of prayer. A lifestyle that illustrates childlike dependence on the Father.

As we close, I would like to leave a question for all of us to consider. When was the last time we approached the Father as dependent children asking, seeking, knocking? Was it because the situation had become an emergency? Or was it simply a way of life for us?