

“A Spacious Place”

Introduction: As we arrived safely and easily at our first inn on our recent trip to England, I messaged a couple of folks to let them know and said, “The only decision we have to make is whether to have a nice cup of tea, take a bit of a nap, or search out the closest pub.” To which one person responded, “Go for all 3, then repeat!”

Jesus seems to be giving a similar kind of response in his call to ask, to seek, and to knock. These verbs are all present imperatives, which means they call for continuous action, which means that Jesus wants us to go for all 3 and to repeat, and to keep on repeating – keep on asking and seeking and knocking with persistence and expectation!

This is not the first time Jesus has talked about prayer in his Sermon on the Mount. You may recall that earlier in his message he warned about wanting to show off in prayer by being concerned with how we looked and sounded to others when we prayed (Ma. 6:5-9). And then he also gave us an outline to help guide us in our praying which has become known as the Lord’s prayer (Ma. 6:9-15).

Now, as his message approaches its end, Jesus returns to prayer to highlight not only our need to pray but also the character of the Father in heaven to whom we pray. For, how we view this Father very much impacts and directs the relationship of prayer he calls us to enjoy with him.

I. Problems with Prayer

A. As we begin to think about prayer, let’s admit at the outset that as Jesus goes on in this passage, offering promises to go along with his imperatives, we begin to have some serious questions. He says: “For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.” Really, Jesus? Everyone? All the time? This doesn’t seem to square with our experience, does it? Our experience reveals that God doesn’t always seem to give us what we ask for, that illness or poverty or injustice prevails. Our experience sees others who we know who do not pray but they seem to be doing really well anyway. Our experience leads us to wonder if God might be tired or busy or uninterested or even incapable, or to consider that if Jesus says our heavenly Father knows what we need before we ask him (Ma. 6:8), why bother? Better, maybe, to focus our energy on discovering our strengths and developing them.

B. So, we can become discouraged about prayer. And we can come up with some helpful answers, maybe, like our motives are impure (cf. Jas, 4:3 and the old song, “O Lord, won’t you buy me a Mercedes Benz!”), or we need to learn to adjust our wills to God’s will, or the kingdom has come but is not yet here in its fullness, or that sometimes “no” is the answer (cf. Garden of Gethsemane).

C. All of those answers have validity, and we should ponder them carefully and they can be helpful to us. Perhaps more helpful might be to simply notice that God invites us to ask, seek, and knock. And that he invites us to do so means that there are things in our lives that we lack, that we can’t accomplish on our own, and that we need to ask, seek, and knock for. What are those things? Well, how about the context in which find these exhortations: the entire Sermon on the Mount! The Sermon is a grand declaration that being a Christian isn’t just a matter of believing certain things; it’s a matter of growing into a citizen of the Kingdom of God, of being renewed in the likeness of our creator, of battling

lust, to loving our enemy, to doing to others as we would have them do to us, that only God can enable. Prayer, in this sense, is an act of humility, a declaration of our great need if we are to become and be the people God wants us to become and be.

D. And because God invites us to ask, it means he also wants us to interact with him, that the Christian faith is a relationship, and relationships are all about working things out, and about growing deeper in love. How would this happen if we didn't ask, seek, and knock, not just once but on an ongoing basis?

II. The Direction of our Prayer

A. How this process works out, how this relationship grows and is cultivated, rests very much on the kind of God we're able to interact with. So Jesus goes on to make sure we recognize that this God, this Father in heaven, is not stingy, abusive, or thoughtless. This God is infinitely good and gracious. This is the God, Jeremiah declares, who does not desire to harm us but to prosper us and bring us hope and a future. Jesus parses this out with the example of human Fathers who, even though they are sinful, still know how to give good and appropriate gifts to their children. How much more, Jesus reasons, would the God whose fatherhood ours is patterned after, give good gifts to us?

B. One picture the psalmist gives us of this goodness of God comes in the phrase, "a spacious place." As we declared in our psalm of approach: "He brought me into a spacious place; he rescued me because he delighted in me" (19:18). Another psalm puts it this way: "You have not handed me over to the enemy but have set my feet in a spacious place" (31:8). And then there's the prayer that is Psalm 4 which begins with this asking, seeking, and knocking: "Answer me when I call to you, O my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; be merciful to me and hear my prayer" (v. 1). "Give me relief" is literally, "Make a spacious place for me..." This word "spacious" means to be refreshed, to breathe, to have ample room, and, most importantly, *it is what God delights to give his children.*

On our walk in England we encountered many such spacious places as The Cotswold Way took us through the beauty of rolling hills and farmland, walking most of the way out in the open, and feeling almost embraced by such beauty in what became a wonderful, outdoor, cathedral.

What the psalmist wants us to know is that when the walls that are a part of the challenge of life feel like they are closing in, God desires to give us spaces in which to breathe in his love freely and have a peace that is beyond description. It's how Psalm 4 ends, with the psalmist able to lie down in peace despite the apparent prosperity of the wicked. And it's the fruit of the practice of prayer, the ongoing asking, and seeking, and knocking kind of relationship, which doesn't always provide us with neat and tidy answers but does bring us into the presence of a loving, gracious, heavenly Father who is maybe doing nothing more complicated than inviting us to rest for a while in the spacious place of his glorious presence.