

# Two Time Prayer

Matthew 7:7-11

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Over the last little while, I've had a few lively conversations with some friends about prayer.

This was occasioned by a friend of ours asking for prayer in a group chat. Some friends were more comfortable offering "thoughts." Some thought that "thoughts" weren't enough. Some wondered if this was just two different ways of saying the same thing.

Most of us have prayed in some form or another for most of our lives. Some still do. Some do not or at least not in the same way.

What *is* prayer? How do we do it? Does it work? How do we know? Does God magically reach down into human affairs and twiddle a few knobs here and there to readjust things? Do outcomes depend on the quality or quantity of prayers offered? What would that say about God?

Prayer is a mysterious thing.

And yet, we continue to pray. At least some of us do. I pray every day. I pray publicly often.

We pray for many things. We very pray for peace in a world of violence and war. I got off the plane last night and read the news about the assassination attempt on Donald Trump, which feels ominous in all kinds of ways in a cultural context that feels stretched to a breaking point.

And of course, there is Gaza, and Ukraine, and Ethiopia, and so many other places.

We pray for those we love who are going through health challenges. We ask for healing, relief from pain, and hope for better days ahead.

Our church circulates a prayer chain where nearly every week someone somewhere that we love and care about is going through something hard and they need the support of a community and the grace and power of God.

We pray because we want good for those we care about and we believe that God wants good for them, too.

We pray for those are struggling in a relationship or who are facing financial stress. We pray for those navigating depression and anxiety, for those struggling with addiction, isolation, poverty, incarceration.

In each of these examples, we ask for what we want. Something is wrong, and we want God to fix it.

In fact, many of our prayers could be reduced to something pretty basic: God, fix all the bad stuff, make it better.

That's what we want. That's what we ask for.

And based on our passage this morning, it seems like we have good grounds for adopting this approach.

Ask, Jesus says, and you will receive.

This is followed by about two chapters of people asking and receiving.

A man with leprosy says, "Lord if you are willing you can make me clean." And Jesus is willing (8:1-4).

A Roman centurion asks Jesus to heal his servant. Jesus speaks the word, and it is done (8:5-13).

Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law and many who were demon-possessed (8:14-17).

Jesus calms a storm for his panicky disciples. Even the wind and the waves do what Jesus wants (8:23-27).

Jesus casts a legion of demons that were tormenting two men into a herd of pigs. They didn't even have to ask, and they received (8:28-34).

Jesus heals a paralyzed man (9:1-8), raises the daughter of a leader of the synagogue from the dead, and a woman who simply touches his cloak is relieved of twelve years of suffering (9:18-26).

The blind and mute approach Jesus pleading "Have mercy on us, Son of David." And he does (9:27-34).

That's a lot of asking and answering. And that's only a page and a half in Matthew's gospel. We could obviously find many more examples if we kept going in Matthew and into Mark, Luke, and John.

And it doesn't even seem to matter much who's doing the asking. Lepers, the blind and the mute, a desperate woman, a paralytic, but also a Roman centurion and a leader of the synagogue.

The only common denominator seems to be that something is wrong, and someone wants Jesus to fix it.

It's the same for us. Something is wrong and we want God to fix it.

Sometimes God does. There are times when our petitions are answered in just the way we want. I've heard stories of miraculous healings, of rescued marriages, of troubled kids returning home, of the clouds of depression lifting.

But more often, the bad stuff remains. Why?

Jesus says that even we, who are sinful human beings know how to give good gifts to our children and how much more, therefore, will your Father in heaven do this for us?

But what about when he doesn't?

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I don't have a comprehensive answer to the question of how and when and why prayer doesn't "work" the way we want it to.

But I want to make three comments about this passage in Matthew. I hope they can help us make sense out of a passage that seems, at face value, to set up impossible expectations for us.

First, the stories recorded in Matthew 7-8 are descriptive, not prescriptive. They were announcements of Jesus' identity and ministry in a specific time and place in God's story. They are not recipes for all people getting bad stuff fixed all the time, much as we might prefer that they were.

Jesus' healing was part of his bringing and enacting of the kingdom of God, fulfilling ancient prophecies that talked about how God's anointed one would bring good news to the poor, would release prisoners, recover the sight of the blind and set the oppressed free.

Jesus' miracles aren't timeless templates for all people at all times. They're more like declarations of Jesus' identity.

Second, God is not Santa Claus. We know this, even if we often treat God like this in our prayers.

We know, from other parts of the gospels and the rest of Scripture that God is not a vending machine for human beings to plug in some good behaviour and get the prize they want. So, we should take this as a clue that this passage can't be about that and look for other ways of interpreting it.

As I read and reread these chapters in Matthew this week, another interpretation occurred to me. I don't know if someone else has thought of this before me or not (I suspect it's not unique to me!), but I submit it to you this morning as one option.

Earlier I talked about the two chapters that come *after* this morning's text. What if we look at the two chapters that come *before* Jesus' words about asking, seeking, knocking.

Here, we encounter, of course, the early parts of the Sermon on the Mount.

1. The Beatitudes (5:2-12)
2. Salt and light—acting as a light *in* the darkness (which presumes there will still be darkness) and as a preservative in a context where corruption will remain (5:13- 16)

3. Not being angry with our brother and sister, about settling matters quickly, about being reconciled (5:21-26)
4. About avoiding lust, about eliminating that which leads us into sin (5:27-30)
5. About the immorality of adultery and the tight restrictions around divorce (5:31-32)
6. About avoiding oaths (5:33-37)
7. About not resisting an evil person, turning the other cheek, giving to anyone who asks (5:38-42)
8. About loving enemies (5:43-48)
9. About doing our good deeds in silence, not requiring the notice and applause of others (6:1-4)
10. About praying as Jesus taught us to in the Lord's prayer, longing for God's kingdom to come on earth as in heaven (6:5-15)
11. About fasting—disciplining our desires, training ourselves to hunger for that which does not spoil or fade (6:16-18)
12. About not worrying (6:25-33)
13. And, just before our passage today, words about not judging lest we be judged (7:1-6)

These are hard words. This is thought by many to be the hardest and most idealistic part of Jesus' teaching.

**And many, if not all of them, sort of presume the context of a world where bad things still happen.**

Right after all these words, Jesus says, “ask, seek, knock.”

You will receive. You will find. The door will be opened. Your father wants to give you these good gifts.

What if Jesus assumes that our seeking, knocking, and asking is not about unfolding a laundry list of “bad stuff we’d like God to fix in our lives and in the world?”

What if, when Jesus says, “ask, seek, knock” he’s talking about asking, seeking, and knocking our way toward becoming the kinds of people that he has just finished describing?

He knows this way of living doesn’t come naturally to us. He knows that we read Matthew 5-7 and think, “who can do that?”

And so, he says, “Ask, seek, knock.”

Third, Jesus himself is familiar with asking and not receiving.

*Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me...* Jesus knows the experience of wanting an easier road and yet still having to walk through pain.

Even from within Jesus’ own story we see that Matthew 7 is not a blank cheque from heaven.

I hope these three points can help us make interpretive sense of a passage in the Bible that is sometimes used by well-meaning Christians to claim that with enough faith we can get whatever we want from God.

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But of course, we aren’t just interested in making sense of a few verses in the bible, are we?

What I’ve said thus far might help us with our understanding of Matthew 7:7-12. I sincerely hope it does.

But we want more than to just figure out a tricky part of the bible. We want to know how to *live* in a world where prayers seem to go unanswered! We want to know how to pray, how to keep hoping, how to anchor ourselves in goodness amid all the bad stuff that still needs to be fixed remains.

We want to know how to be people of faith, hope, and love even when the disease spreads, even when the child continues down a bad path, even when world is still stained with the deeds of violence, even when the innocent still suffer.

A few concluding comments:

First, keep asking. Persevere.

Like the persistent widow in Luke 18.

Like Simeon, who had spent his whole life waiting and longing for God's Messiah, the "consolation of Israel."

Like Job who, even in the midst of all his unbearable suffering, could say, "I know my redeemer lives and in the end, he will stand upon the earth."

We keep asking, even if the answer doesn't seem to be coming. We believe that the asking, seeking, and knocking are part of how God is making all things new.

We don't understand the timing. We don't understand the pain and frustration that come along the way.

But we believe that our hunger for things to be other than they are—in the world, in our lives, in the lives of those we love—is a hunger that has been given to us by God.

Second, check your motives. This one is perhaps a bit harder to hear but the Bible occasionally says hard things.

James 4 says,

When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives.

We must acknowledge that at least *some* of the time, our motives in asking, seeking, and knocking are selfish.

We're not interested in how we might be shaped as human beings by hard roads. We like the quick fix and have been conditioned to like this by an instant culture.

Sometimes, God has plans for us that may take a long time to unfold.

Finally, be open to God answering your prayers in ways you don't anticipate. God is famous for doing unexpected things.

And God is also famous, I'm sorry to say, for leading his people down difficult roads. The examples in Scripture are too numerous to even mention. I don't think it's even possible to find a character in the bible that didn't encounter tremendous trials on their journey with God.

This is one of the ways in which God grows his people.

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In John 10:10, Jesus says “I have come that you may have life and have it to the full.”

In John 16:33, Jesus says, “In this world, you will have trouble.”

Not *might* have trouble. Will. Trouble will find you.

**We live our lives in between these two statements.**

Richard Beck is a guy who I quote regularly. He is a professor of psychology in Texas, and he is one of the few people left on the Internet who has been blogging as long as I have! His blog is called Experimental Theology.

He recently wrote a six-part series on his blog on “A Theology of Petitionary Prayer.” I highly recommend reading it. In part five, he talks about the importance of praying in “two times.” He uses a few fancy theological words in the quote that follows, but I think the basic point is clear:

[P]rayers against death and evil during the penultimate, petitions offered *before* the last things, will be haunted by desolation and lament. This is not to say that God does not act, often in surprising and miraculous ways. It is simply the observation that, in the penultimate, people still die and suffer and that prayers offered in the penultimate will not receive a full or final answer... [E]veryone dies. In the penultimate, if you count the wins and losses between your prayers and death, death will always get the final Win. And until Christ defeats the powers of evil, the nations will continue to rage. The innocent will continue to suffer and die. Here in the penultimate we live in a time of war and rumors of wars. To offer up petitions in the penultimate, therefore, is to step into the experience of lament.

And yet, we also pray in anticipation of ultimate hope. We petition proleptically. When the last things are realized there will be no more death, no more weeping, crying or pain. God will wipe away every tear.



In short, a theology of petitionary prayer describes how we pray against death and evil "in two times." We pray with one foot in the penultimate and one foot in the ultimate. We pray in both lament and hope.<sup>1</sup>

All of our prayers are two time prayers.

The fullness of God's future time trickles back into the current time of trouble and helps us to transcend and redeem and lament and grieve and hope and persevere here and now.

Jesus says one more thing: "But take heart, I have overcome the world."

Take heart. Ask, seek, knock. Keep going.

All our asking, seeking, and knocking is not to a generic dispenser of desirable outcomes. That's Santa Claus.

We pray to one who loves us, one who smiles upon us. We pray to the one we love, and we trust that his love is strong enough to lead in between the times.

Amen.



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<sup>1</sup> <https://richardbeck.substack.com/p/a-theology-of-petitionary-prayer-1be>