



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Matthew 7:7–12

Gospel of Matthew

“The Queen of Experiences and the Everest of Ethics”

TRANSCRIPT

The Scripture reading is a continuation of the exposition of Matthew, and so we’re turning to chapter 7 and reading verses 7 through 12. Matthew chapter 7 verse 7 through verse 12. After having finished the section on censorious criticism and sensible criticism, in the continuation of the discourse Jesus says,

“Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him? Therefore all things whatever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.”

May God’s blessing rest upon his inspired Scripture.

Our subject for today in the continuation of the exposition of the Gospel of Matthew, and specifically the Sermon on the Mount, is “The Queen of Experiences and the Everest of Ethics.”

William James once described prayer as “intercourse with an ideal companion,” and the description has lingered on as a delineation of the activity that characterizes genuine believers in Jesus Christ. Theology has historically been called the “queen of the sciences,” and in many of our theology manuals and volumes it is still called the queen of the sciences. And if this is apt, then prayer might well be called the queen of the experiences. And to these testimonies might be added the apostle of predestination, John Calvin, who in a sermon on 1 Timothy chapter 2 verses 1 and 2, wrote, “The principal exercise which the children of God have is to pray, for in this way they give a true proof of their faith.”

There are some people who believe that the kind of doctrine that John Calvin preached was the kind of doctrine that leads to inactivity, to lack of witnessing, and also to lack of prayer, to lack of diligence in the Christian life. History, of course, gives the lie to that. Whatever one may think of the strong predestinarian views of the great Geneva theologian, it is evident that they did not affect the place of prayer in the believer’s life.

In fact, in our world, the sovereignty of God is the strongest incentive to prayer, because it assures us that the things that we ask God are well within his power to perform. So it would appear to me that so far as the doctrine of the sovereignty of God is concerned, it should be the greatest incentive to the bringing of our petitions to God.

The facts are that prayer is the very breath of the regenerate soul, and when the Lord Jesus wished to direct Ananias to the apostle Paul after he had encountered Paul on the Damascus Road, he gave a brief characterization of the new creature in Christ which, inevitably, and also since that time, has marked out the true believer in Jesus Christ. And the clause that the Lord used in order to mark Paul out as a new creature was the clause, “behold, he prayeth.” It is the characteristic of the true believer in Jesus Christ to pray.

Now we do not speak, of course, of the kinds of prayers that people make when they pray to other gods than the Father of our Lord Jesus. It is entirely possible for a person to pray to a god in the skies and not to pray truly, for the only prayer that is a true prayer is the prayer addressed to the true God that is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. All other gods, in the language of the Bible, are no gods at all. But it is characteristic of the true believer in Jesus Christ that he expresses his faith in prayer.

Where there is life, there is breath, and where there is spiritual life there are spiritual breathings, for prayer is the speech of the soul to God. And if you're sitting in the audience this morning, and you've never really come to believe in the Lord Jesus, all of the petitions that you may have offered to an unknown god are petitions that God does not answer. But petitions that are addressed to God through our Lord Jesus Christ are petitions that he does answer. And the true mark of a believing soul is that he prays.

It's therefore surprising to hear the testimony of a modern Presbyterian minister from a northern city concerning prayer, not sure that he has time to both preach and pray—preachers ordinarily now preach only once a week, anyway.

I once had a student come to me at Dallas Theological Seminary. Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in Ashkelon, lest the uncircumcised Philistines from other seminaries hear [laughter], but he did ask me the question the first week or so that he had arrived, “Dr. Johnson”—he got me off by himself; I thought it was something that was of great moment—he said, “Dr. Johnson, what do ministers do throughout the rest of the week?” [Laughter] And he had the idea that you could stand in a pulpit and the Lord would give what you had to say to start with, and that the whole week remained to do anything that you wanted to do, and it seemed a rather strange thing for him. I was not surprised when I inquired about a month later to discover that he was no longer at Dallas Seminary. Evidently he had decided that he wanted to work throughout his life. [Laughter]

This modern Presbyterian minister said, “Can a minister produce a weekly prayer as well as a weekly sermon and do a creative job on both? And are there not more important things we can do

with our time? With this attitude of prayer, it's not surprising to find that the pastor solved his problem by turning over the pastoral prayer to the laymen in his church.

Now there's nothing wrong with turning over the prayers of the congregational meeting to laymen in the church—if there is such a thing as a layman to start with. There's nothing wrong with that, and something very good about it. But, this interest in prayer is hardly an acceptable motive for turning over the prayers to someone else. It may surprise you to know that prayer is really the only subject on the Sermon on the Mount that the Lord Jesus has discussed twice, and that may be the key to the value that he placed upon it.

Many years ago, Andrew Murray wrote, “Jesus never taught his disciples how to preach, only how to pray. He did not speak much of what was need to preach well, but much of praying well. To know how to speak to God is more than knowing how to speak to man. Not power with men but power with God, is the first thing. Jesus loves to teach us to pray.” This fine Reformed minister of the Word of God from South Africa has hit upon something that has some significance.

I'm not advocating that we do away with the subject of homiletics in our theological institutions, but I do think that it is a startling thing to realize that all theological institutions have courses on public speaking and homiletics, but so far as I know, there is not a single theological institution of seminary status in the whole of the United States as far as I know—in the whole of the Western World—that has a required course on [indistinct], or the doctrine of prayer. It would seem to me that this is a great neglect, so far as the Christian church is concerned.

No doubt the need of prayer is the reason that the Lord Jesus brings up the subject at two points. And, it certainly is appropriate in this context because, you will remember, that in the discussion of the Sermon on the Mount, I have tried to suggest to you that the force of this sermon is try to delineate the disciples, the characteristics of the life and ministry of those who were to be with the Lord Jesus, anticipators of the coming kingdom of God. They were his disciples, and thus designed to set forth the characteristics of the life that is to guide them as they minister under him,

awaiting the coming of the kingdom of God upon the earth. And so, prayer, obviously, is one of the great things that the disciples must learn, and also must practice.

In the immediate context, in the passage we will consider next Sunday, Lord willing, he speaks of entering in at the narrow gate or turning aside into the broad way, and surely, when we think about entrance into life, prayer is of the greatest significance. And finally, in the immediate context, the 7th verse follows the 6th—that’s a very weighty comment, you’ll notice [laughter]—the 7th verse follows the 6th, and in the 6th we have had, “Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast your pearls before swine.” It’s very difficult for us, as human beings, to know with any sense of assurance, who are those dogs, and who are the swine? And just as one might expect, it would be natural for us to say, how can we possibly know who are the dogs and who are the swine? Well, the answer is through prayer.

Prayer is the indispensable necessity for making biblical judgments, so I’m not surprised, then, that the subject appears here. Let’s look then, first of all, at the exhortation to prayer contained in the 7th verse. The connection by the therefore is, as I have mentioned—or rather, the connection of the section with the preceding—is as I have mentioned: “Where will I ever get the wisdom necessary to exercise judgment in a sensible and discriminating way?”

Now, this exhortation is couched in the present tense in the case of each imperative: ask, seek, knock. In fact, they could be rendered: go on asking, go on seeking, go on knocking. Now that lays some stress upon importunity in prayer. And did you notice also as we read, there is a rising intensity in the verse? Ask, then rising to further intensity, be seeking, and finally, go on knocking. As Thomas Manton said, if we don’t receive by asking, then let us seek. And if we don’t receive by seeking, then let us knock.

This asking implies a sense of humility and a recognition of need. And one gains here, I think, an inkling of the reason for the divine institution of prayer as the means for the realization of spiritual and other blessings. Through it, two great hindrances to the spiritual life are combated, and the first is arrogant self-confidence. The exhortation by the Lord Jesus to pray is an attack on the

arrogance of self-confidence, which suggests that we really do not need any divine enablement in life. This is really a kind of practical Pelegianism, the attitude that once we have been converted and have come to know Jesus Christ, it is no longer necessary for us to pray. It really introduces us to a system of works religion.

Pelegius was a Roman monk—really a British monk—who came to Rome in the year 401, and preached there for about eight or nine years. He was a very popular preacher. His name, Pelagius, is the equivalent of the English word, Morgan—that was his name, Mr. Morgan. But he is called Pelagius, because the term, pelegius, is derived from the word in Latin that means “sea,” and that was his name in English, too.

Pelegius is the originator of the doctrine of Pelagianism. Pelagianism is simply an outgrowth of legalism. Pelegius, and his followers, Colestius and Julian of Eclanum, were men who believed that it was possible for men, of his free will, to be emancipated from God. Men were not affected by original sin; we were all born in the same status that Adam was when he was in the Garden of Eden. And we each have within ourselves the power to do the will of God. Obviously, if God lays upon us the obligation to do certain things, we must have the power within ourselves to do them.

And so, this had a very specious appeal to the people of Rome in his day, and he preached with great fervor and with great popularity. If God has called us to do something, then surely we have the power to do it, little understanding the fact that often God tells us to do certain things which are impossible for us in order that within ourselves we may discover that we do not have any power to do them, and must, consequently, rely upon him. And when this issue reached a head in the Reformation with Erasmus and Luther struggling over this, it was Luther who understood and Erasmus who did not.

So the idea that we can—once we have come to know Jesus Christ as Savior—we can pretty well live independently of the power of God in our lives is attacked head-on by the exhortations of the Lord Jesus, addressed to disciples to prayer.

And second, prayer combats lethargic passivity, a too-common condition in the lives of believers which often results in a false kind of quietism. Now many of you know that from the pulpit of Believers Chapel there has proceeded a message which has been grounded, for the most part, in the sovereignty of God. I personally, and others who have preached here, believe that God is sovereign in the affairs of men. And we believe that he is working out his purposes, and that he will accomplish his purposes, and that he cannot be frustrated in the accomplishment of them, that he is a sovereign God.

Sometimes, when individuals come into an understanding of these great doctrines of the grace of God, how he saves us in his wonderful grace, and how he keeps us, and sanctifies us, and how he will ultimately glorify us through his marvelous grace, we somehow take this doctrine and twist it and torture it to mean that therefore we have no responsibility whatsoever to listen to the exhortations of the Word of God and seek, under the power of God to perform them.

Now, prayer is an effective combating of that false, extreme emphasis on the sovereignty of God that overlooks human responsibility. We do have human responsibility. We are responsible to read the exhortations of the Word of God, and we are not only responsible to read them, but we are to obey them—that is our responsibility. But we do not, in our explanation of the responsibility of man, seek to water down the sovereignty of God so that it means nothing. We as Christians believe that God is working out his purpose, and he will work out his purpose to a successful conclusion. He is a sovereign God.

But we are responsible, and this evidenced by the fact that we are told to pray: ask—go on, asking; seek—go on seeking; knock—go on knocking. You should, in Tertullian’s phrase, “with a holy conspiracy besiege heaven,” One of the great Puritans, also a believer in the sovereignty of God, said, “All three of these commands presuppose faith. A man who does not believe will not ask. A man who does not have faith will not seek, and one who does not have confidence in God will not go on knocking. These are the inevitable issue of faith, and the man who asks and seeks and knocks in the name of the Lord Jesus is exhibiting his faith in that.

And this faith is the thing that makes the prayers of the saints different from the prayers of the world. It makes them warm and fervent. I love that statement of Thomas Brooks’, “Cold prayers always freeze before they reach heaven.” Cold prayers do not characterize biblical praying, they characterize parroting, and in our prayer life, if we pray in cold, formal, liturgical, vain repetition, you can be sure it is not biblical praying.

Now I want to comment on the present imperatives that are found in that 7th verse. Ask (go on asking). Seek (go on seeking). Knock (go on knocking). Now there raised the question of the difference between vain repetition and importunity. And there is a close relationship between the two.

There are two kinds of repetition. There’s the repetition of importunity, and we are exhorted in Scripture to importunate prayer—continued, persistent prayers. And there is the repetition of formality. The repetition of formality is vain repetition—the kind of repetition in which, well, often we do not even understand what we are saying. It is the thing that the Lord Jesus has spoken about in the 7th verse of the 6th chapter when he says, “And when ye pray, use not vain repetitions as the pagans do, for they think they will be much heard for their vain speaking.”

Now these verbs, of course, do not necessarily mean that we should ask for the same thing over and over again. To be exhorted to go on asking, and to go on seeking and to go on knocking does not necessarily mean, go on asking for the same thing, go on seeking the same thing, or go on knocking for the same thing. Because it’s entirely possible—and I rather think that’s the point of this passage—that it means go on asking, but ask for this and ask for this and ask for that as you have occasion or need, and so on. That is what is called a frequentative use of the present tense. That is, you ask at many intervals, at frequent times.

But let’s just assume for the moment that they mean go on asking for the same thing, go on seeking the same thing, go on knocking for the same thing, for that kind of prayer is biblical prayer. Persistent prayer is a biblical exhortation.

Well now, what shall we do if we don't get our answer? Is the prescription of Elton Trueblood the simple answer? When the medicine fails, take more of it. [Laughter] I doubt that. It would seem to me that that is a humanistic kind of explanation. The explanation for the need of importunate prayer must finally rest in what God's delays in answering our prayers do for us. And first of all, they are the seed of divine discipline. The reason that God has us ask for the same thing over and over again is often to discipline us and to test our earnest desire to receive that particular blessing.

Now on a very low level, I think I have an illustration of that from my own experience. About three months ago, four months ago, now, my wife, because of her illness, and I had a little talk, and we decided at the time that it probably would be wise for us to add about eight feet to our bedroom in order to put in a hospital bed. It's necessary.

And so, we obtained the architect who drew the plans originally for our house, and we drew some plans, and we added the eight feet or so to the bedroom. In the course of adding the eight feet or so to the bedroom, we had to dig up the patio in the backyard. Well since the backyard was so small after digging up the patio, we decided that we would just brick in the whole backyard. And that's what we decided to do. At the urging of my wife, and at the urging of the architect, I yielded [laughter]. That may have been a mistake; I don't know.

He said, “It'll only take ten or eleven days to do it. That was back in March. [Laughter] At the present time, if you passed by our house, you would see six thousand brick out in my front yard, [laughter] and also a large sand pile—one in the back, too, which the rain is gradually decreasing [more laughter]. But, at any rate, the sand is there, the brick is there, and in my back yard we have one of the largest mud pies in all of Dallas [more laughter]. And we have at least accomplished the surfacing of it with sand. That's the way it stands at the present time.

The other day, my wife was heard to say to me, and then to others, “Perhaps the Lord is telling us that he does not want us to have a brick backyard?” [Laughter] Now I replied, “Well I don't understand how the Lord would want us to have a front yard with six thousand bricks in it [loud,

sustained laughter]. I won that argument, incidentally, because it did seem to have a lot more cogency to it as far as she was concerned, and so, in the meantime now, it's been about three months, and we're still waiting for that patio in the backyard. And we're being taught a few lessons of discipline, and perhaps that's the reason why the prayers for the solution of this problem have not been answered.

Another reason that God calls upon us to pray with importunity is that they deepen the channel of our spiritual life. By constant prayer, why that leads to a deepening of our relationship to the Lord, and brings us into a more fruitful communion with him.

Many of you have had the experience of praying for others for years and years. I know in my own case, I have prayed for members of my family's salvation for many, many years. Some of them died without any evidence, outwardly, of having come to faith in Jesus Christ, but a verse gave me an assurance that they had come to Christ. But I have prayed for years for members of my family. And I am sure that I have been blessed through that prayer, for many times my communion with God has been around these petitions.

This importunity also affords us occasion for rising above our experiences and our emotions and the physical trials into the heavenly sphere of patience, faith and hope under the wings of our great God. Persistent prayer is pleasing to our God.

Well, we come to the latter part of the 7th verse, or the last half of each one of these clauses in which we have the results of prayer. As to the promise that is fulfilled when the promise is obeyed, “In each instance the correspondence between command and promise is exact,” so Mr. William Hendrickson has said.

In verse 8, the promises are strengthened by the use of the word, everyone: “For everyone that asketh, receiveth.” Now this is an expression that emphasizes the certainty that we shall receive an answer to prayer. It is as if God has signed for us a blank check and called upon us to write in the amount that we like. Ask, and you shall receive. Seek, and you shall find. Knock, and it shall be

opened unto you. And if you have any question about the fact that this is for you, he says, “For everyone that asketh receiveth.”

In other words, this is something for everyone.

And incidentally, for our prayers, there is no better way to pray to God than to take his promises and return them to him in petitions. Our prayer is most effective when it is the reversal of the promises of God. I do not know of any better prayer than to take God’s Word, his own Word, form it into an argument, and then return it to him. That is why, incidentally, in our prayer life it is so important that we study the Scriptures and know the prayers of Scripture so that we may bring them back to him.

Now an argumentation is introduced by our Lord. In the 8th verse he gives the scriptural reason. The reason for prayer is that it is simply sure to be answered. Why should we not pray, if he has promised the answer to our prayers?” And his words here, incidentally, are an expression of the same promise given by the apostle John, when he said, this is the confidence that we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And this is the same kind of sentiment that Paul expresses when he states, “But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.” So, we have a kind of threefold court of our Lord, the apostle Paul, the apostle John; they all urge us to pray because our prayers shall be answered.

A godly man once said, “Remember, nothing lies outside the reach of prayer except that which lies outside the will of God,” and how thankful we ought to be that there are some things which lie outside the will of God for us. That is why, when we do not get answers, we should not be downhearted over it. We should remember that God has his decreative will, and he is not going to violate his will, and that is the best thing for us. And if we do not get the answer, we can be sure that it is the best thing for us, and we can praise him for the fact that he didn’t give it to us.

Now he argues, logically, having said that, he states in the 9th, 10th and 11th verses a very simple kind of argument—and it touches the lesson that our heavenly Father is sure to be counted upon the equal of any earthly father; in fact, he will do more for us. Take, for example, a son. A son

who comes to his father and asks for bread, will a father give him a stone? Incidentally, the reason that he has these two together, bread and stone, is because in ancient times, a loaf of bread looked very much like a stone. Then if a child comes and asks for a fish, will he be given a serpent? And you, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much shall your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him.

So, the argument is very simple. If a son asks for something that he needs, he surely can expect that he will receive that from his father. He will not receive that which is evil. We may then infer that if evil men give good gifts to their children, our heavenly Father will certainly give good things to those who ask him. Like Hordare said, “If you wish to know how the Almighty thinks of you, listen to the beating of you own heart and add to it infinity.”

That particularly applies to a father who has children, or who has had children, and who knows that when children come to him, it is the desire of his heart to meet their need. If you think a father has a desire to meet the needs of his children—and a natural father certainly, ordinarily does—then look into the heart, look into your heart, you fathers, and add to it infinity about how God feels about his children.

What are the good gifts that the Lord Jesus speaks about? Well, there are some things that he has spoken about in this sermon. He has said something about “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven.” That surely is a good thing. “Give us this day our daily bread.” That’s a good thing. He has promised us that. “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,” that’s a good thing, “and, lead us not into temptation”—these are the things that he will give us: the answers to these petitions.

Furthermore, in the latter part of chapter 6, we have had great stress upon the fact that the Father supplies all of our needs. He will give us food, he will give us clothing. He will give us everything that we need; why should we be anxious for these things? And if we have the further assurance that our heavenly Father will give us good things, much more than an earthly Father, why is it that we Christians are so filled with anxiety and worry over the future?

One of the things that characterized the Puritans, that godly band of Calvinistic servants of God of the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries was the priority that they gave to secret communion in prayer. There were two great doctrines that characterized the Puritans. One, the doctrine of the sovereignty of God, and the other, the doctrine of personal piety, and in their personal piety, it was characterized by prayer. They believed in a sovereign God, and they spent their time in prayer because they did believe that their God was sovereign, and that he was able to accomplish the things that were upon their hearts, which he had placed there.

Howell Harris is not a very well-known preacher of the Word, but he was one of the Puritans in doctrine and also in life. Some of his prayers are very beautiful prayers. One of them is,

“Here I am with all that I possess at Thy feet. I will address Thee till my bones tire. Since you giveth freely, I will not be content with an ordinary measure of grace. Make me as poor and as despised as Thou wilt, but give me spiritual wisdom, and give me unusual knowledge of Thy self.”

Now what a great prayer that is.

If I may be permitted to tell you something personal. A few years ago, when I became a Christian out of the insurance business in Birmingham, Alabama and heard Donald Grey Barnhouse preach the doctrine of the sovereign grace of God in salvation, and was brought to the knowledge of Jesus Christ, it was not long after that the Holy Spirit impressed upon my mind the centrality of the study of Holy Scripture in a believer’s life. And ever since those earliest days of my Christian life, one of my petitions at the beginning of the year—and it is one that has persisted throughout the years—frequently I pray this, “O God, give me understanding of the Scriptures. Give me an unusual knowledge of Thy Word, in order that I may more effectively serve Thee and also may more deeply know Thee.” There can be no greater petition than a petition like this.

And I would encourage you, if you want to know something to pray for yourself, go home, enter your closet, your room—by yourself. Get down upon your knees and pray, O God, give me spiritual wisdom and give me an unusual knowledge of Thyself. And you will find that God will answer that prayer for you. I still pray that petition. I still, even this past week, have prayed that spiritual petition, that God would give me that spiritual wisdom. I know that I have resisted much of his teaching, but it is my earnest petition, still, that he will meet my need in that way.

It’s no wonder that God worked mightily through these praying men. “When we would have any great things to be accomplished, the best policy is to work by an engine which the world knows nothing of,” said another Puritan, John Preston. And prayer is an engine that the world doesn’t know anything about. It’s more powerful and better even than the new engine that Volvo has invented.

[Laughter]

Now I find the use of the words, stone and serpent, very interesting. The fact that he used them would seem to indicate that we do think of him as giving us these instead of the requests that we desire. Isn’t it a striking thing, isn’t it a testimony to the evil of the heart of man, that he can actually believe that in the petitions he gives to God, God will give him a serpent? Or give him a stone? Now, it is, I think, in our heart, deep down within, an expression of rebellion against him. But very frequently, we enter into prayer with that very attitude: he’s not going to give it to us.

Some years ago—about twenty—my wife and I had a very good friend who was listening to me preach week after week. She was having difficulty at home, and she frequently came by our home. I would imagine, for a while, it averaged at least once a week, and the phone at least another time or so. And this went on over a considerable period of time. We urged her pray. And she did pray.

And one day she came by, and she expressed to us one of the experiences she had in prayer. It became quite evident—at least, it so seemed to her—and it seemed to us, too, that God was not going to answer the prayer in the way that we all wished. And so she came by and spoke to us, and said that she offered specific petition to the Lord about this event, about this matter. And she said, it became evident to her that he was not going to answer it in that time and in that way. And she said

that in the course of her prayer to God—she had expressed that to God—and she had said to him, “Lord, I have asked you about this over and over again, and you have not given it to me. And it does now appear that it is not going to be given me by you.” She said, then she added, “I knew you wouldn’t do it!” [Laughter] It’s an expression of the fact that when we come to God, we expect that he is going to give us, instead of bread a stone, and that he’s going to give us a serpent instead of fish.

There’s another interesting theological insight in the 11th verse. We hear a great deal today about the dignity of man. There is a sense, of course, in which this is a biblical doctrine. We have been made in the image of God, and while the image in us has been marred and distorted, it has not been destroyed. And if you mean by that, we are made in the image of God, and there is a kind of reflection of God, even in fallen man, then it is perhaps permissible to speak about the dignity of man. But I assure you, that expression is not only not in the Scriptures, but it is not emphasized at all. The Scriptures stress just the opposite.

And of course, some have noticed that, but they have sought to lay the burden of stress upon original sin, and guilt and condemnation upon the apostle Paul. Frequently, it is said, “That’s the kind of doctrine that Paul preached,” as if to suggest, if Paul preached it, then it’s not necessary to believe it. It was the expression of Paul, as if he is a kind of innovator in Christian doctrine—not realizing that the statements of Paul have the same weight as the statements of any other author of Holy Scripture and have the same weight as the words of our Lord Jesus himself, for they both are given us by the Spirit of God.

Well, the facts are that there is no disjunction between the teaching of our Lord and the teaching of Paul. Paul truly believed in original sin, and he believed in guilt, and he believed in condemnation, and he believed in everlasting punishment. But so did our Lord. And Paul believed that man was evil, and so did our Lord. For we read in the 11th verse, “If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give good

things to them that ask him?”—if ye then, being evil. That is our Lord’s evaluation of human nature, and it is no different from the apostle Paul’s: “there is none righteous, no not one.”

Well, we have just a few moments to speak about the Everest of Ethics. This is a kind of culmination of the didactic portion of the Sermon on the Mount. It has been called “the Everest of Ethics” or “the Golden Rule.” Someone has commented that it is very probably the most universally famous thing that Jesus ever said. It is thought by many that this verse is the concluding verse of the sermon proper, a kind of capstone of the didactic portion of the entire message. It may be a summary of the entire sermon, in that it presents the kind of righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

It’s a well-known fact that the Golden Rule has some similarities in the languages of others. Rabbi Hillel, one of the famous Jewish Rabbis, said, “What is hateful to thee, do not to anyone else.” And Confucius said, “Do not to others what you would not wish done do yourself.” It’s often been pointed out by Christian expositors that those are negative statements of the Golden Rule, whereas Jesus Christ expressed it positively. I would not, myself, too rigorously press that distinction.

The distinction between the two lies primarily in other realms. In the first place, Confucius and Hillel did not speak those things in the context such as we have in the New Testament. They were spoken in contexts in which they become statements about calculated prudence to avoid retaliation—[a] very selfish kind of statement. And in addition to that, the non-Christian rules are viewed as one that we are able to fulfill without divine enablement. And finally, the non-Christian statement majors on the relationship of man to man and overlooks our relationship to God, which is, of course, a relationship that is beautifully and fully expounded in the Sermon on the Mount.

They are reflections of what our Lord has said, but they are inadequate reflections of the great expression of his. He says that this is the spirit of the law and the prophets, and with this we return to chapter 5, verse 17, “Think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets; I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill.”

Well, as one reads and rereads these verses, the importance of asking becomes prominent. Five times, the word, ask, is used. The multiplicity of its occurrence is an invitation to do just that: ask. The spirit desired is that of Jacob who prayed, “I will not let thee go, except thou bless me.” I do hope, that as you listen to these words, you have been encouraged and incited to pray—to ask.

And the natural corollary follows. There’s a great stress upon the certainty of answers to prayer. Nine times, it seems to me, in these verses, an answer to prayer is either stated or implied in the section, and we shouldn’t be surprised at the answer.

You know the story of Peter in Acts chapter 12, when he had been put in prison after the martyrdom of James the brother of John. And you’ll remember how the angel came to the prison, and freed Peter from the prison. “The angel fetched Peter out of prison,” Thomas Watson said, “but it was prayer fetched the angel.” And the prayer was the prayer of the saints. So when Peter got out of the prison, and was set off on his own, he went straight to the home of Mary—isn’t it interesting how the New Testament has so many Marys in it? It’s evident that God loves Marys, and so do I.
[Laughter]

Well, he went to the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark, and he started knocking [makes knocking sound] on the door, and Rhoda came to the door. She heard the voice of Peter, and she rushed back without opening the door. “It’s Peter!” they said. As rationalists—this is the way we do when we get an answer to prayer—we say, “She’s mad.” [Laughter] And no, she keeps insisting, no, it’s Peter, it’s truly Peter. And then one of the superstitious brethren says, “It’s his spirit. It’s his ghost.” But fortunately, God’s answer kept knocking [more knocking sound].

And so finally they opened the door, and there was Peter. And you know what the text of Scripture says? “They were astonished.” [Laughter] They had been praying, Lord, release Peter. Release Peter. Get him out of prison. He’s knocking on the door. They see him. They don’t say, “Well what do you expect. We’ve been praying about it. We expected you Peter; we’ve been looking for you.” They were astonished. Amazed. Their prayers had been answered.

There’s a rather cruel story. I don’t think it’s true, but George Buttrick has told it. He told the story of a bishop who was resolved that he was going to practice what he had so often preached. And so, he was going to speak to God in direct simplicity. He went in before the chancel. He lifted his voice to God, and he began his prayer. And a voice, gentle but holy answered him, “Yes, what is it?” And the bishop was found dead, in front of the chancel.

Prayers do surprise us at times. I think that’s a little cruel. I doubt that it’s true, but I think that sometimes the answers that we do get to prayer surprise us so much that some of us who have heart trouble might have some difficulty.

The one great, final, unanswerable argument for prayer is that Jesus Christ prayed. Of all the people who did not seem to need to pray, the Lord Jesus is the one. For after all, he is earth’s divine and sovereign Lord, and yet, the characteristic thing of the ministry of our Lord [is] that he went out and spent long hours on the mountain praying to God. He prayed before he selected the apostles. He prayed in the Garden of Eden [*sic*]. He prayed on the cross at Calvary. His whole life was bathed in prayer. Of all the people who did not, it would seem, need prayer, Jesus Christ is pre-eminent, but he prayed.

And how do you think that we can possibly get along without prayer if he, the Son of God, could not? May God use these simple words to lead you into a deeper experience of the knowledge of God through the Word and through prayer.

If you are here, and you have never yet believed on the Lord Jesus, you do not have the right to approach God in prayer. Your prayers will not be answered. God answers the prayers of his saints, but of course, he answers the prayer of a person who desires to be a saint. And so, if you come to God, and come to him with a petition upon your lips, by which you enter into relationship to him who has suffered and died for sinners, you shall enter into the life, into the family of God. That means you have a Father who answers your petitions. If you’re here and you’ve never believed in the Lord Jesus, we invite you to put your trust in the one who has died for sinners. And in dying for

sinner, he has laid the foundation for eternal life, the forgiveness of sins, the relationship of priest before God, and he calls upon you to believe.

May God, through the Spirit bring you to faith and trust in him, and may the first expression of the new life which brings with it faith, be, “Behold. He prayeth.” Shall we stand for the benediction?

[Prayer] Now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, the fellowship and communion of the Holy Spirit, be and abide with all who know him in sincerity.

And O Father, give no rest nor peace to those who are outside of Christ. Give them restlessness until they rest in him.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.