July 3, 2016

“The Life of Prayer for the Child of God”

Matthew 7:7-12

**FCF**: The need for encouragement in prayer

**PROPOSITION**: (magnet) Because it is fundamental to following Him,

(anchor) Jesus exhorts us to persistent prayer.

**SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:**

We all need encouragement – especially when facing a daunting task. Growing up, I was on a swim team. During one meet, I was swimming breast stroke as the anchor in a relay. For the final lap, I started out a body length behind the leader. So the prospect of our team winning was not terribly good. But amidst the shouts of the crowd, I could hear my dad’s voice. “*Go! Push it, Richard, push it!*” Well, I did and somehow managed to pull ahead and win. We all need encouragement. And when it’s sincere and heartfelt, it has a way of moving us forward.

Jesus, knowing and loving us as He does, is speaking encouragement to His followers in this text. It’s needed encouragement in an area no few of us struggle with – the need to pray.

**SCRIPTURE READING**: Matthew 7:7-12

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

**SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

Anniversaries and birthdays are occasions to pause and reflect, to take stock of things and ask, “*How are we doing?*” Independence Day, July 4th, is no exception. Many see and seize this opportunity to ask questions and give analysis. “*Where are we heading? Why are things as they are? What changes do we need to make?*” It’s important to not lose sight of your fundamentals – especially when there are forces at work, things in play, threatening to get you off track.

Jesus is pressing the fundamentals of the Christian life here. He exhorts His followers to persistent prayer (READ Matthew 7:7-8). You can hear the sense of increasing urgency. Ask! Seek! Knock! The idea is, “*Do this and keep on doing it*.” Three commands are given, each then followed with a promise. And then the promises are repeated. What’s going on here?

Good question. Here’s the answer. Because it is fundamental to following Him, Jesus exhorts us to persistent prayer. Persistent prayer is fundamental to following Jesus. So He exhorts us to it. And we can see how fundamental this is in three ways. First, in the reality of the demands. Second, in our inability to comply. And, third, in the compassion of our Father.

1. **THE REALITY OF THE DEMANDS**

First, the reality of the demands presses us towards persistent prayer.

1. *The Immediate Context*
2. The tension before us

Consider the immediate context and the tension before us. We looked at this last week. On the one hand, we are called to be morally discerning without being judgmental. That is, before I go to get the speck out of your eye, I am to get the log out of my own. On the other hand, however, Jesus says we are not to be naïve. There is a time to stop because we have a treasure to keep.

1. The question before us

But now we have a question before us. Are we up to this? Left to our whims and moods, we will likely make a shipwreck of all this. That’s the immediate context. And it pushes us to pray.

1. *The Larger Context*
2. The content of the sermon

But now let’s look beyond that to the larger context, the content of the sermon (READ Matthew 7:12). This ties back to all that has gone before. (READ Matthew 5:17) These are bookends.

1. The summary of the sermon

So now content of the whole sermon is before us. In fact, we have a summary of it here with the Golden Rule (READ Matthew 7:12a). This goes beyond the negative, stating what we’re not to do. That could be fulfilled by just sitting back and doing nothing. And many ancient cultures stated it that way. But Jesus is moving us to action, to seizing the initiative. And it’s a tall order.

The point being that the reality of the demands alone presses us toward persistent prayer.

*Application:*

Though we may like to, we are not free to dumb down Jesus’ commands. We cannot play with the Beatitudes, the equivalences drawn between hate and murder or lust and adultery, the call to love our enemies, and so on. We can’t say, “*He didn’t mean that*.” Because He did.

It is a steep hill. The reality of the demands alone presses us toward persistent prayer.

1. **OUR INABILITY TO COMPLY**

Which takes us to a second point, our inability to comply. This also presses us to prayer.

1. *Operating Assumption*

Note Jesus’ operating assumption of us (READ Matthew 7:11). This is total depravity.

1. What it does not mean

Now, let’s be clear. Jesus is not saying we are as bad as we could be. He is not saying that we are utterly evil and depraved. He is not saying that we are incapable of doing any good at all.

1. What it does mean

What Jesus is saying, what He simply takes for granted, is that we are self-centered and not God-centered. Which makes for total and radical depravity. So everything we do is tainted by this.

1. *Grave Implications*

And that has some grave implications for every single one of us without exception.

1. The immediate context

Just in this immediate context, as we try to balance the command of vv.1-5 with the warning of v.6, we find that we can’t do it. We are perpetually falling off to one side or the other.

1. The larger context

Then, as we look at the larger context and read back through ch.5-7, we see that this depravity and brokenness utterly cripples our ability to live out every part of what Jesus is teaching. And owning that – hear me – owning that is fundamental to following Him (READ Matthew 5:3).

Our inability to comply with the Lord’s commands presses us to persistent prayer.

*Application:*

I said earlier, regarding His commands, that we dare not play them down. Let me add this. Regarding our ability to walk in His commands, we dare not play that up. Ah, my friends, that is a mark of the pride and arrogance and folly that comes before a crashing fall.

Our inability to comply with our Lord’s commands presses us toward persistent prayer.

1. **THE COMPASSION OF OUR FATHER**

But there is one more thing. And that is the compassion of our heavenly Father.

1. *A Simple Argument*

(READ Matthew 7:9-11) This, of course, is a very simple argument Jesus is making.

1. Our human fathers

Our human fathers will not give us what is useless or harmful. They naturally and gladly give us only what they believe to be good and best. And they, even on their best days, are yet evil.

1. Our heavenly Father

So, given His wisdom, power, and love, how much more will our heavenly Father care for us!

1. *Great Implications*

Now, this simple argument has some tremendously great implications for us.

1. Who God is

Who is God? This is absolutely critical. God is not a stranger to convince or a tyrant to fear. Nor is He a grandfather we can manipulate or a genie we can use. He is our Father in heaven.

1. What He gives

And what does He give? Good gifts to His children. Good things to those who ask Him. Meaning what? Meaning the transforming grace to become “beatitudinal people”. Meaning the slow and steady progress of walking in heartfelt pursuit of the Golden Rule. Such things are truly good things, the best of gifts, the greater and nobler and deeper longings of our hearts.

Such our heavenly Father delights to give us. And that presses us to persistent prayer.

*Application:*

Now, that may not always come in the way we have in mind. It may come like surgery without anesthesia. It may feel like forty years in the desert. But He knows what He’s doing.

Think on the compassion of our heavenly Father. That presses us to persistent prayer.

**CONCLUSION:**

(READ Matthew 7:7-8) The repetition is striking. Jesus wants us to hear this. And He knows we are slow to hear it. But why? We know there are some things we just don’t get. They don’t come easy to us. It may be a sport. I’ve tried but just can’t get the hang of golf. Or it may be a subject in school. I’ve studied calculus but just can’t get the hang of that either. These things don’t come naturally to me. I just don’t get them. Okay, but what about this here? Why don’t we get this? Why are we so slow to hear, to hear what Jesus is saying in Matthew 7?

Part of it is that we tend to believe the opposite of the three things we’ve just looked at. We don’t believe the reality of the demands is that tough. We don’t believe our inability to comply is that crippling. And we don’t believe that the compassion of the Father is that good. Our assumptions about these things are inverted and flipped around from where they should be.

So that’s part of it. But the other part is surely our pride. We have bought into the lie that we can handle things ourselves. We’ve become ensnared in the trap of self-sufficiency.

And Jesus, knowing and loving us as He does, presses in hard here to press the point home to us. Because it is fundamental to following Him, Jesus exhorts us to persistent prayer.

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