

Barratt Ministries Challenge

Issue 50

ASK: IT SHALL BE GIVEN

Sermon on the Mount Series

Matthew 7:7

by Maurice Barratt

This verse begins a new paragraph in the Sermon on the Mount concerning prayer; or more specifically, concerning answered prayer. Unanswered prayer is the biggest blight on Christian life, the greatest hindrance to the spirit of prayer, the greatest discouragement to our faith. But answered prayer is the greatest motivation to pray. There is no greater encouragement to our faith than when our prayers are answered.

It is a strange thing that Christians so rarely question their unanswered prayers. We pray for a sick person, in faith, with bold words, claiming healing. Then the person dies. And we move on to pray for the next sick person, with the same bold faith. But we don't stop to question: "What went wrong? Why did you not answer the prayer, Lord? Did we not hear correctly from you? Why not? What did we not understand?" Instead, we just ignore it, but it registers in our spirits as another "unanswered prayer" — and our bold words of faith gradually become nothing more than empty words: sounding brass and tinkling cymbals with no real faith or conviction behind them. Inside we are discouraged and faith has died.

No conditions?

So it is vital that we understand the teaching that Jesus is giving us here on prayer, because in these three statements he tells us we will be answered. It shall be given, you shall find, it shall be opened. Everyone who asks receives. No exceptions. No conditions. Or so it seems. But we must be careful. We must not take one statement of Jesus out of its context; we can't just take one verse and use it to pump up our faith, if it isn't in context.

In Isaiah 58.1-2 God warned Israel that though they were seeking him daily and asking of him, though they "delight to know my ways", they would not have their prayers answered, because they were seeking with a wrong motive. And Hebrews reminds us that Esau, seeking to regain his blessing once Jacob had usurped it, "sought it with tears", but all his diligent asking and seeking could not obtain an answer. Asking and seeking, in itself, is not enough.

Context is king

What's the context here in Matthew 7? "If you then being evil know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father in heaven give good gifts to them that ask him?" (Matthew 7.11). That's the condition. If a child asks his father for something, will he give it to him? It depends. If the child asks for a motorbike, the father is going to say no, because he doesn't want his child killing himself and other people. If the child asks for £50 to buy sweets, his father is going to say no. It's not a "good gift". And Jesus is telling us it's the same with God. We are only children, and often we don't understand what is good and what will be bad for us. But there are many things that are good gifts, and we can ask for those with the certainty of faith that God will answer. We will look at some of them later.

Easy - but immature

Asking is the simplest, easiest form of prayer. It requires no effort to ask. There are no hindrances to asking; nothing — except perhaps pride — would stop a person bringing a simple request. Asking is the natural thing to do when we want something, whether it is from need or greed.

But asking is also the most immature form of prayer. Often our asking springs from a state of worry, fear or doubt. Of course it is not wrong to pray when we are anxious and afraid, but one trusting prayer is more mature than the continual asking that comes from anxiety, and confident faith in God's care is better than the asking that springs from constant doubt. Maturity means trusting that older, wiser people know best, and Christian maturity means trusting that God knows best. Likewise, every parent knows that repeated asking is a sign of impatience in a child. Patience in prayer means asking and then trusting — without setting God a deadline to perform what we ask.

Jesus often rebuked the disciples for their lack of faith, for not trusting in God. Just a few verses back from where we are in the Sermon on the Mount, we find Jesus scolding us for being anxious about our daily necessities. "Your heavenly Father knows that you have need of all these things", he says in Matthew 6.32, and the implication is that he is telling us to not "mither" God by continual anxious asking for things that God knows about anyway. Earlier, in verse 8, he tells the disciples not to be like the heathen in their prayers, "for your heavenly Father knows what things you have need of, before you ask him." The implication here is stronger: Jesus says the heathen think that God will hear them because of the number of times they pray, and keep bringing the same prayer. Jesus calls this "vain repetitions" — and you and I have done it — bringing the same prayer to God day after day, beseeching him, pleading with him. We may call it "perseverance", but God calls it "vain repetitions". We call it faith; God calls it doubt.

New Christians

The testimony of a new Christian is often wonderful with regard to answered prayer. Suddenly in their new-found relationship with God they find all their prayers are being answered, even unspoken ones. God seems so close, he really does know everything, he really does answer every need ... and then, as time goes on, as they go on in their Christian life, there aren't so many answers to requests,

and God seems further away. What has happened? Have they lost their first love? Has the fire burnt low? Not at all. It is just that they are not baby Christians any more. It is time to grow up, to learn patience and trust. Babies need the devoted attention of their parents; they have a constant need for reassurance, for a hand to hold. And so God is very close by, and his closeness is evident in immediately answered prayers. But then the time comes to “put away childish things”, to move on to maturity. And God will make you wait, and stand back a bit, because although answered prayers are a boost to faith, you don’t learn faith from answered prayers, you learn faith by patient waiting and trusting for the answers.

The prodigal son

The parable of the prodigal son reveals the different attitude that maturity brings. The young son had a child’s attitude when all he wanted to do was claim what was his right for himself. He said to his father, “Give me the portion of goods that falleth to me” (Luke 15.12). But in the pigsty he learned a different attitude, and when he returned to his Father in humility and shame, his request was different: “Make me as one of thy hired servants” (v. 19). “Give me” changed to “make me”. And our prayers should follow the same pattern. No need for “Give me this, Lord, give me that”. God knows what you need, and if you don’t need it, don’t worry if God doesn’t give it to you! You’ll be better off without it. Let our prayers become “Make me like you, Lord”. That’s asking for a “good gift”.

Asking the wrong thing

Many times in the bible people asked for the wrong thing. The mother of James and John came to Jesus, doing all the right things. First, she worshipped him. Then she brought her request, asking if her sons could have the two places of honour next to Jesus in his kingdom. Jesus told her, “You don’t know what you are asking” (Matthew 20.22). The same is often true of us. We need the training and understanding that brings maturity in prayer. This lady asked wrongly because she asked from a wrong motive.

James gives us a simple reason why our prayers are not answered. “You ask, and receive not, because you ask amiss, that you may consume it upon your lusts” (James 4.3). If your prayer is not answered, there’s some good questions to ask yourself. Why am I asking for this? Is it for my benefit, or for others, or for God’s benefit? Who will it bring blessing to? In this case, the prayer is not so much “unanswered”; it is answered, but the answer is “no”. That often happens with God. Paul prayed 3 times that his “thorn in the flesh” might be removed, and God’s answer was “no” (see 2 Corinthians 12.8-9). Even Jesus had to take “no” for an answer: “Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee; take away this cup from me” (Mark 14.36). Like Paul, Jesus prayed three times the same way. But after the third time, that was enough. He had his answer, though it was not “his will”. He accepted God’s will.

Good gifts

So, what things may we confidently ask for, knowing that God will answer? What are the “good gifts” that our heavenly Father will delight to give us? In Luke’s gospel, paraphrasing the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says “how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?” (Luke 11.13). We can always ask with confidence for the Holy Spirit, which is not only a benefit to us personally but to the whole church. It’s not a selfish request; in fact, it’s the opposite, because if the Holy Spirit is at work in you, there will be less of self, less of you, and more of him.

Ask for wisdom

James tells us about good requests as well as bad ones. “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men liberally” (James 1.5). Asking for wisdom is asking for a good gift. It’s an unselfish gift that blesses others and blesses God. Even God was blessed when Solomon asked for wisdom in preference to anything else (1 Kings 3.5-11). Reading the epistles of Paul, for example, we can go through picking out verse after verse of “good gifts” we can ask of God. In Ephesians 1.17 Paul is praying for the church, so we can confidently echo his prayers, and he asks “that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him: the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to his mighty power ...” There are at least four good requests in just those few verses, and these type of prayers occur many times throughout the epistles. Paul’s requests for himself were in a similar vein: “that I may know him” (Philippians 3.10).

The first stage

Asking is only the first stage in this three-part saying. Jesus is the master teacher. The three things all mean something different, and they are progressive, in order. Asking is the simplest form of prayer, the most childlike and therefore the most prone to immaturity and abuse. Seeking and knocking represent further stages. But let us first seek to ask aright, to ask wisely, to ask for good things. If you’ve not had any answers to prayer lately, you need some, or your faith will begin to fail. So pick some good prayers, the sort which God says he will answer. Have the confidence to believe that God will do it. Don’t doubt in your heart. Be positive. A positive mindset is a good thing. It has been abused by prosperity preachers and “possibility thinkers”, but the principle of being positive, thankful, trusting and confident in God is a part of faith. Determine to hear from God. “Be careful [anxious] for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4.6-7).

EXPERIENCES FROM LIFE

by Joanna Barratt

Thank You Lord!

One of the most beautiful characteristics of Christianity is that you never need to worry about your future, because God has promised to take care of that for you. When we have needs, we don't have to worry, we can bring them to God. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said that we were to take no thought for our lives, what we eat, drink or what we wear because our Heavenly Father knows we have need of all these things ... but we are to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and other things will be added. Once we have started on the path of discipleship we are in line for all "these things" to be added, and I've found in my own experience that I've never had to struggle and strive in prayer for certain things.

For instance, when I first left home I had a terrible time holding down a job just because of my untameable character. I seemed to argue with all in authority and bosses would not stand for my disagreeable attitudes. This was a real problem for me because I needed to work to ensure that my rent would be paid every week, otherwise I wasn't only out of a job, I was also out of my home! I decided to take on work with a temporary employment agency who would place me in a job for a day, or a week, depending upon how long a firm required temporary assistance to cover for a member of staff who was either sick or on holiday, or to do a particular job until the firm found a permanent employee. I really enjoyed this type of work because I was never there long enough to get involved with arguments, and if someone infuriated me I could just say to myself, "No problem, I probably won't be here next week!" And sure enough, I would be moved elsewhere.

No security

The only problem with this type of employment was that I was not secure, there was no holiday or sickness pay to look forward to, and they couldn't guarantee that I would always be in employment. I was told upon enlisting that a report would be sent back to the agency and if I worked well and the bosses were pleased with me, then I would be given priority to be placed in a job before others in their employ. This was a wonderful incentive, and I prayed earnestly that God would help me with my attitude and keep me in work. God answered my prayer. I always loved to work and be challenged with learning new jobs, consequently bosses would often request that I was sent to them when they needed help, and throughout all the years I worked for the agency I was never once out of work.

Maurice was looked after in a similar way. He's lived at our house since he was about 23 years old and used to subsidise his income by letting off rooms to students who needed accommodation. After some years of doing this God told him to only let rooms off to Christians, then God told him not to let rooms out at all and so Maurice had to subsidise his income by coach painting and earned more doing this than he had ever earned in his life. Then God called him to work full time in the ministry and to give up secular work altogether. Maurice realised that this meant trusting God to

provide for himself, his wife and 2 young daughters, but he was more afraid to disobey the voice of God than to trust Him to provide, so he made a commitment to do as God had commanded. Immediately, God sent someone to the house with a very well paid job, who voluntarily said she would add her whole salary every month to the part time wage of his wife and the meagre salary his young daughter received doing a job on “works experience”, to pay the rent, bills and food. Since making this promise to God, Maurice has given himself to the ministry and never done secular work, and God has always met his needs. He has had his faith stretched many times, and been up many nights praying that God would help in times of crisis, but he has never had to go to the world for help. God has always been there for him.

A miracle every month

Indeed we need a miracle every month to keep going at Barratt Ministries. We have so many needs. We don't honestly know where all the money comes from to allow us to carry on with the work, but God told us once “not to despise the little sixpences” because if we kept collecting the small amounts people bless us with they would add up. People often expect God to send them mighty windfalls to clear all their debt and make them worry free, but that doesn't really build up faith and trust in God. We know that God answers prayer and is worthy of our trust because we have lived on this knife edge for such a long time. Our faith in God is built on experience.

People could say Maurice and I are irresponsible having children with no secure means of income, but we never need to claim support or benefit from the world. God gave us the promise that “if we build His house, then He will build ours”.

From the time I was pregnant with Nathan, our first child, the Lord has bountifully supplied. I was the beneficiary of 2 “showers”, one in America and one in Holland, when Nathan was given so many useful items ranging from clothes to creams and nappies. I was loaded up with bags full of clothes for each stage of his growth, so much so that I was able to pick and choose what I really liked and wanted. The funny thing about this was that my children have often worn really “cool” designer clothes without my even knowing it, and it has given me lots of opportunity to witness to God's goodness when other mothers have made comments. I've never had to worry about prams, cots, bedding, highchairs, toys, and so many other things because God has seen the need and taken care of it, sometimes even before I've asked Him to.

God hasn't only provided clothing for us, many times people have been prompted by God to bless us with food. I remember one Christmas when we didn't have a turkey, some gypsy friends of ours called to see us as they wanted to give us some carpet. When we went to their van to help them in with it, we saw half a duck wrapped in foil, which they hadn't been able to use. They had wanted to give us this too, but felt that we could have been insulted if they had offered. We put their minds at rest straight away and thanked the Lord for this very thoughtful provision also.

There was another period when very often some other contacts of ours would drive up in their van and drop off bin liner bags full of scones, cakes, donuts, and so many different kinds of bread that I couldn't list. They did this for months. They even gave me a freezer so that I could keep what I needed without it going stale. We were given so much that I was able to pass on bags full of these

goodies to the parents in my children's school, and also take some round to the hostel for battered wives and mothers nearby.

On another occasion we were blessed with trays and trays full of tinned stewing steak. It had been a long time since we had tasted anything so good and at first we were eating steak practically every evening. But as the tins kept coming into the house, we began to disperse these into other homes where we knew there was a financial struggle and the Lord didn't only bless us but, like with the loaves and fishes of that little boy in the Bible, so many others were blessed also.

God doesn't only send people to the house with provisions to make us feel blessed, I feel this way about the fact that I have so many low cost supermarkets around me who are in competition with each other. O.K., I don't buy brand names which are supposed to be of superior quality and taste better, but for the limited amount we have to spend each week on the groceries I can stock our cupboards up with all the necessaries and even get praise from my children at the end of a meal for the wonderful dinner they have just eaten! Maurice is always polite, but this is praise indeed from kids!

God knows our needs

When we pray "give us this day our daily bread", and "Lord, please look after us and provide us with what we need", I don't feel as though I need to name specifically what I want because the Lord knows what we need, even when we don't. For a long time, because we have so many visitors at Barratt Ministries, people have either hinted, or else I've thought, about getting a dishwasher, but after considering the running costs — electricity, soap powder, rinsing liquid — I've dismissed it as fanciful. But just recently I visited some friends and two individual couples, on the very same day, told me that God had told them to buy me a dishwasher. To be honest, when the first person mentioned this I immediately thought of the running costs and said to myself that this was a lovely thought but most impractical. But when the second person told me, faith sprang into my heart and I realised that God wanted to bless me as two is a witness. I mentioned my dilemma to the first couple and asked what they thought I should do. "Accept your second offer for the dishwasher, and the money we would have given you for this item is still yours to use to buy whatever YOU need, not Barratt Ministries." Hallelujah, the dishwasher is installed together with the other things I had really wanted for myself and the children but couldn't justify spending the money on.

"Thank you Lord for your promise that when we ask you to look after us you really do give us good things."