

Praying Our Way Forward
Matthew 7:7-12

April 7, 2002
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Have you heard the story about the pastor and the taxi cab driver who happened to die at the same time? They arrived simultaneously at the Pearly Gates. The taxi cab driver was awarded a fabulous palace, complete with fountains, vast lawns and an army of servants. Meanwhile, the pastor was ushered down a lonely lane to an extremely modest place where he was invited to spend eternity. Discerning the discrepancy between the two rewards, the pastor complains to St. Peter saying, "Look, I spent my entire life ministering to other people. If the taxi cab driver deserves a mansion, why don't I get one, too?" St. Peter immediately responded by saying, "Well, up here, we go strictly by results. When you preached, people slept. When the taxi cab driver drove, people prayed."

Today, I ask you to join me in forty days of prayer. I ask you to pray daily for this church of ours that we love. Let us not talk about prayer, read about prayer, or even right now, study about prayer. Let's just pray. Let every move we make and every decision we take, be an action of God that is directed by his will.

Let me suggest these three statements of Jesus as a guide for our prayer time together today and in the days to come:

ASK AND IT WILL BE GIVEN TO YOU

Jesus said in his instruction on prayer in the Sermon on the Mount: *Ask and it will be given to you.* Ask. Let your requests be made known to God. The writer of James in 4:2 says, *You have not because you ask not.* I do not know why God, in his divine providence, wants his children to express their needs, but it is all through the Bible and we best embrace it wherever we find it.

I want to invite you today to God-size your requests. You know how it is when you go through the fast-food chain and the lady at the counter says, "Do you want to Biggie-Size your french fries?" I am suggesting to you today that you "Biggie-Size" your prayers. Get them up into the realm where there is no way on earth that you can manage to fulfill them. Then, you have begun the acts of faith together.

Bruce Wilkinson in his book, *The Prayer of Jabez* tells a story about taking five year old David to a public playground that was equipped with the finest of swings, monkey bars, and seesaws. However, most engaging to David were the three sliding boards—one small, one medium, one enormous. David shot for the small one first. He climbed right up the steps, slid down the slide, waved on his way around, as he continued to go again and again. You know how it is with small sliding boards; you get bored. So, he moved quickly to the medium sized slide. He hesitated a little at the bottom, looked to the top, and with one more wave to

his parents, went right up the steps. With a look of fear and excitement, he went down that slide with a big smile on his face that said, "I've mastered it!" Eventually he gets tired of the medium slide. That is when he goes over to the enormous one. Confident now, he doesn't tarry long at the bottom. He just starts climbing up the steps. Half-way up he literally freezes. Fear. Making matters worse, a teenager is pecking at his heels, saying, "Okay, kid. Either get out of the way or go on up." David simply yells to his father, "Daddy, will you come over and slide with me? I can't do it without your help." Bruce says, "I was standing there all the time just waiting for him to ask. And with one simple request I ran to him, came up the slide behind him, picked him up, carried him to the top, sat down at the top of the slide, pulled him between my legs, put my big arms around him, and with one sign of joy between the two of us, we went down that enormous sliding board together."

Then, Bruce Wilkinson says, "Many of us seldom pray because we have never been on the big sliding board." We have chosen to live our lives in fears and doubts. We go through life needing to be in charge. We only try what is possible. We only attempt what is manageable. Who needs God when you know how to do it yourself? If you have life under control, you don't spend much time with the Lord. It is when you get into water way too deep in which to swim that you begin to exercise your faith and reach out.

Today, my friends, the kinds of things we are talking about doing in this church is absolutely miracle stuff. There are no projections that say we can do it. I just need to talk with you today about God's powers moving in our midst to perform miracles among us. I happen to be one who believes in miracles. Do you?

Furthermore, the kind of God you are making this request to, according to Jesus, is like a good parent. Let me tell you about good parents. You are good parents. I tried to be a good parent. You just want to do everything you possibly can for your children. We want nothing less than the best for our children and grandchildren.

Jesus reasons about prayer: *What parent would offer stone for bread or serpents for fish? If we know how to do that for our children, how much more will our heavenly father grant what is asked by his children?* No, God is not a Santa Claus with a need to fulfill a gigantic wish list. God is like a heavenly parent who wants to be engaged with his children. *Ask, and it will be given to you.* I ask you to ask.

SEEK AND YOU WILL FIND

The second phrase in this trilogy of sayings of Jesus about prayer is: *Seek and you will find.* To seek is to hunt, to pursue, to delve into, to explore, to try to discover. There are a couple places I want to ask you to do some searching for the next forty days. The first is **within**, down in your own heart, in your own home, in the places that are really close to you. In Luke 15 Jesus tells a tender story about a woman who misplaced a coin. She is so bewildered by the loss that she

lights a lamp, sweeps the floor, and searches carefully until she finds it, because something important has been lost.

I don't know about you, but almost every day of the week, I begin my day with questions like, "Have you seen my keys?"

"Where's my calendar?" I laid my cell phone down someplace and I can't for the life of me find it. I am constantly saying to Sandy, "Where is this?" "Where is that?" She has a miraculous way of saying, "There it is, just where you left it yesterday." We have to seek.

Where can we find 10.8 million dollars to fund the capital needs of this church over the next three years? I know only one place to find it. It is in our homes, among our assets, somewhere tucked away in our net worth. Maybe prayer alone will help you find it. It is time to seek down deep in your soul.

It is time to seek "out there." It is time to dream about possibilities and potentials that maybe you haven't thought about for a long, long time. Sandy and I have been doing that already because this particular program asks us to declare our pledge early. We have been prayerfully considering ways in which we can meet this challenge with our most faithful response. I need to say to you today that we have few assets, no rich relatives, and already tithe to this church. But, I also want to tell you, on May 5th, when it comes time to write it down, we will write down a thirty-thousand dollar pledge to this campaign, because we believe in it deeply.

While God and God alone should guide all of our personal decisions, I do ask as your pastor and friend to take a long look before you leap. What dreams can you still fulfill for the glory of God? What more could you do for the good of others? Is there a hobby you can explore, a business you can start, a book you can write, a job you can take, that might make a difference in what you might be able to do over the next three years for the kingdom of God in this place? *Seek and you will find.* I have watched people seek before and I can guarantee they find.

KNOCK AND THE DOOR WILL BE OPENED FOR YOU

The third trilogy of Jesus about prayer is: *Knock, and the door will open for you.* The doors of opportunity will open for you. The angel says to the church in Philadelphia in Revelation 3: *Behold, I set before you an open door which no one can shut.*

The angel might have written that about Brentwood United Methodist Church. Our potential has never been greater. After eighteen months here, there are doors that have opened in the last six months that I thought a year ago were slammed shut. Your board thought they were slammed shut, as well. But God is not finished with this place yet. He has things for us to do and dreams for us to fulfill. You see, it is time to step through the door of opportunity.

I know what that means. It means more work. I go back to that little prayer of

Jabez that has become so popular. In Chronicles 4:9, Jabez, a minor character of the Old Testament says, *O, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory.* How many here pray prayers like that? My prayers have been, “Lord, could you make it a little easier? I’d like a few more days off.” The Lord spoke to me one day about those prayers almost as directly as the Lord has ever spoken to me and said, “Howard, I’ll tell you something about that easier stuff. If you’ll get the “I” out of the middle of it, I’ll replace it with a “T” and you won’t have it easier, but you will have Easter, so come on and let’s go for the ride.”

The door is open. It is up to us to walk through the doors of hospitality. After eighteen months in this pulpit, I have discovered the key that makes this church what it is today. It is not its pastors, though you have had some of the finest filling this pulpit in the past. You know that. It is not its programs, though the programs today continue to be magnificent. The key that has made this church unique in this denomination is that every time it has come to the crossroads of decision, it has walked through the door of hospitality to swing its doors and arms open to a changing community. That has made all the difference.

When I read the history of this congregation and listen to you tell me the stories, I think about my boys when they were little. I would come home in the evening and they would meet me at the door. We had this little ritual in which I would grab them, throw them in the air, catch them in my arms, and smother them with hugs and kisses. When one would finish the other would climb up and we would go through the ritual all over again. When my arms would finally get tired, I would let them down and they would pull at my pant legs and say, “Oh, Daddy, would you do it again?”

I think how this congregation said after a fire, “The fires won’t put us out. We will build again.” I think how one day this congregation left its sacred territory, some of you were there that day, and walked down Franklin Road to this new adventure. Brentwood community was changing and you heard the challenge of it. You stepped out in faith and did it. I think how difficult it must have been for many of you in this place to make a decision to leave the place of your children’s baptism and come into this vast sanctuary that you thought then you could never ever fill up. When I consider those moments, I want to grasp the heels of God and say, “Do it again, God. Do it again.”

So, I ask you today for forty days of prayer. Pray with me that the whole will of God would come to be and that we would resolve to do the will of God, now and forever. Amen!

