

# The Difference Between a Fish and a Snake

If you have a bible nearby, turn with me to Matthew 7. If you weren't at the Gathering last week, we kicked off a new series we're calling *Formation*. And what we mean when we use that word "formation" is the process of how we *change* as human beings. What it looks like, over time, to become the type of people God designed us to be all along. And specifically, this year, we're taking a look at the role that *prayer* plays in how we change. At the ability of the Holy Spirit to use something like *prayer* to grow us and shape us as human beings.

But we also said last week that the *last* thing we want to do is spend five weeks *talking* about and *learning* about prayer, and still not actually ever *pray*. So what we've done is come up with several different ways to help you to put prayer into practice every single day throughout this series. Our teaching team put together this booklet that you can grab at the info table on your way out. In it, you'll find a prayer *prompt* for every day from now until February 2. Each day, it will give you something to pray *for* or *about* as a guide to grow in the regular habit of prayer. You can also get those same prayer prompts a couple other ways: you can follow us on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram and we'll post the prayer prompts first thing each morning. Or, if you'd prefer, you can have the prompts *automatically texted* to you each day. You can even pick the *time of day* they get texted to you. All you have to do is text MORNING, AFTERNOON or EVENING to the number 9-10-11. Just pick the time of day you want to get them and text in that word.

And then, just in case that wasn't enough options for you, we decided this past week to post each prayer prompt in the form of an wallpaper for your phone to our website this week. So you can literally go to our website, and grab each day's prompt to set as the lock screen on your phone. So that way, every time you go to unlock your phone to check Instagram, or play Candy Crush, or whatever it is you do, you first see the prayer we're all praying together. So that's now *four* different ways to access these prayer prompts. I think our goal is just to make these prayer prompts chase you down like a ghost in a horror movie. But in all seriousness, **we wanted to make prayer as accessible as possible to you, because we really believe that one of the most transformational things you can do is to learn to pray and pray regularly.** So if you're a follower of Jesus, and you want to start praying more regularly, please be sure to take advantage of any and all of those during this series. So there ya go.

But for today's *teaching*, want to address what I would say (and a lot of theologians would say too) is something you have to address before you can really get much of anywhere with prayer. And that's ***understanding who it is you're praying to when you pray.*** At its core, prayer is just talking to God. It is the primary means by which *relationship* to God happens. So it bears saying that **who you think you're talking to matters a lot in how, and when, and how often, and how meaningfully, you pray.** This is true in *any* relationship: **knowing who you're talking to determines a lot about the conversation you have with them.**

For example, I play this game a lot where when my wife Ana is on the phone, I'll try to guess who she's talking to by *how* she talks to them—have you ever done this? I'll listen to her tone of voice, the topics of conversation—all that, and try to guess who's on the other end of the line. And I must say you guys, I'm getting quite good at it. I'm not very good at a lot of things in life, but this I think I've pretty much got nailed down. Only took me five full years of marriage to learn how my wife talks to people. But the point

is, **you can tell a lot about a person's relationship with someone they're talking to, by how they talk to that person.**

And if that's true of life in general, how true is it of *prayer*? What would someone conclude about your relationship with God if all the data they had was how, and how often, and in what *tone*, and with how much *joy*, you prayed? I'll just go first. Most days, I think someone would conclude that *I* have a very surface-level, *mechanical*, *results-oriented* relationship with God. They would conclude that I mainly see God as someone who can bail me out when I need it. Somebody who can be trusted to swoop in when life is overwhelming, but probably wouldn't conclude that I have a deep, frequent, meaningful, intimate relationship with him. What about you? **My guess is that people could conclude a lot about our relationship with God from how we pray.**

So, I would suggest, that **if we're gonna get anywhere with prayer, we're gonna need some understanding, even if it's basic, of who it is we're talking to when we pray.** What is the nature of our relationship with him like? And *Jesus'* favorite way to describe his relationship to God was the word "Father." This is why his *famous* prayer that he uses to teach his disciples how to pray (what we call "the Lord's prayer") starts with "our what?...*Father.*" And throughout the life of Jesus, when he wants to refer to God, he very often, especially in prayer, will use the word *father*. **For Jesus, something about understanding God as a father seems to be at the very core of prayer.<sup>1</sup> And therefore probably should be for us, too.**

And today's passage is going to try and show us *why that is*. But first, quickly, Jesus is just going to talk in very simple terms about what *prayer* is. Take a look with me at Matthew 7, starting in v. 7:

[7] **"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.**

[8] **For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.**

So I want you to notice, before we talk about anything else, how incredibly *simple* Jesus' language for prayer is. *Asking. Seeking. Knocking.* These are not complex ideas at all. I would submit that **if prayer feels complicated, it may be that we've complicated it**—not that it's complicated in itself. Now, I realize that when we talk about prayer, sometimes followers of Jesus will start talking about it in complex ways. Often, they'll chop it up into concepts like *adoration* and *intercession* and *supplication*. You'll hear people talk about *listening prayer* and *contemplative prayer* and *imaginative prayer* and *singing prayer*. And those are all important, valuable practices from the life of the church. I think there's a time and place for all of that. But I wonder if by *starting there* with prayer, with all *those* concepts, we're not jumping the gun just a *little*. I wonder if it's not more helpful to just start with the simple concepts of *asking, seeking* and *knocking*. After all, Jesus says, people who ask, *receive*. People who seek, *find*. And people who knock, *have the door opened* to them. That makes prayer sound *remarkably* simple, doesn't it?

---

<sup>1</sup> Paul Miller points this theme out in his book *A Praying Life*: "This one-word prayer, Father, is uniquely Jesus' prayer. His first recorded sentence at age twelve is about his father: "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2: 49). Abba is the first word the prodigal son utters when he returned home. It is the first word of the Lord's Prayer, and it is the first word Jesus prays in Gethsemane. It is his first word on the cross—"Father, forgive them" (Luke 23: 34)—and one of his last—"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" (Luke 23: 46). Father was my first prayer as I began praying continuously, and I find that it is still my most frequent prayer."

Now, on that note, I do think it's worth noting that this isn't a "blank check" from Jesus regarding prayer. I don't think Jesus intends to say that *absolutely anything* you ask God for, you will automatically get. I think Jesus is aware that not *every single* person who asks for something receives, that not *everyone* who knocks on doors has all of those doors opened to them, and so on. But I *do* think he's saying, "as a general rule, those who *ask, receive.*" **Generally speaking, if you want something from someone, the way to get it is to ask for it. So we should ask for it.** Like I said, remarkably simple concepts there.

Then he goes on. So next, he's gonna draw a real-life parallel to help us see what he means by "asking." And this is where we get into the idea of God being a father. Look at v. 9:

[9] *Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone?* [Answer to that is...? *No one.* Right] [10] *Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent?* [Answer to that one is? *Also no one.* Who in their right mind would give their kid a snake instead of a fish?! What kind of horrible, misguided father would do such a thing. Snakes are inarguably the worst creatures to ever exist. If you're a snake lover, I don't even want to hear an argument from you on that: snakes are *literally* the reason sin is in the world, according to the bible. So if you *like* snakes, take it up with God, not me.]

So Jesus asks the fathers in the crowd he's talking to, "which of you guys, if your son asked you for a good thing, would instead give them a very horrible thing?" Very simple question, right? So he's tapping into a very *basic* instinct in most every father or parent: the desire to give their kids what their kids ask for. **Most every parent I know of wants to give their kids things. Most every parent I know of enjoys giving their kids things.** Sure, there are parents out there who *don't*, but I think we can all agree that is the exception to the rule. **Most every parent wants to give things to their kids, and most parents generally enjoy doing it.**

Now, I do realize as I say that, that not *all* of us had or have parents like that. I realize that because of the world we live in, quite a few of us probably had parents who *didn't* really get joy from giving us things, or who *didn't* give us things much at all. I realize that some of us had parents who were instead absent or destructive or selfish or abusive—or any number of other things that parents really shouldn't be. And so for you, that part of Jesus' analogy breaks down a bit. And if that's you, I want you to know I'm terribly sorry for that. I *hate* that you didn't have a good picture of what Jesus is talking about in this passage. And I'm sorry that means it will take some work, some processing to get on board with what Jesus says about *God* being a father. But if that's part of your story, in many ways, you're *all the more* aware of the need for a good, loving father like the one Jesus is about to tell us about—precisely because you've experienced the *damage* that comes from *not* having one. And part of what I'm here this morning to tell you is that God desires to be the Father that you never got to have. The Scriptures call God on a number of occasions a "father to the fatherless." He intends to step in where your own dad didn't. And he wants to do that because **he's a good father, and good fathers love to give things to their kids. That's what good parents do.**

This is true to the point that, for Ana and I, we often have to have conversations about how much we're buying for Whit on a regular basis. We'll look at our budget and realize we're spending way too much money on random toys and things Whit wants and have to cut back on it. Now, if you stop and think about it, that's *weird* that we have to have those conversations. Because that's not just general American materialism at work. I mean, if anything, we would *prefer* to buy *him less* things, because then we'd have

more storage space in our house, we wouldn't step on LEGOs literally everywhere we walk, we'd have more money to spend on other things, or even on *ourselves*. There would be a lot of *practical advantages* to *not* buying Whit all the things we buy him. So then, *why do we keep buying him things, despite all of that?* It's **because we're parents, and parents at their core love to give their kids things**. That's just sort of built into who parents are.

And so with that idea in mind, Jesus says in v. 11...

*[11] If you then, who are evil [nice little vote of confidence there], know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!*

So Jesus' point in this story is so incredibly simple and at the same time so incredibly profound: **if this is what earthly parents do for their kids—and they're consumed so often with sin and imperfection and selfishness and a whole host of other things—how much more will a perfect, sinless, heavenly Father do the very same thing?** If I, as a parent, feel that way about my kids, how much more does God feel that way about us as *his kids*?

Let me do it this way. Deep in the recesses of the Target toy section, there something called an alligator car wash. It is made by Hot Wheels, and it is a real, functioning, multi-purpose carwash for Hot Wheels cars. I'll put a picture of it in the slides that we post alongside this teaching on our website. Our three year old, Whit, saw this alligator car wash in a Black Friday catalog during Thanksgiving week and literally talked about almost nothing else every day from then until Christmas Eve. This alligator car wash, my friends, is a big deal to Whit. Now with that being said, what you are hear is the audio, from a video of my son, *opening his alligator car wash on Christmas Eve*. And you may want to prepare to turn down your volume, because there will be screaming [show video].

In case you missed it, that last little bit was my wife telling Whit to "take a deep breath," because we were nervous he was going to hyperventilate, he was so excited. So we won Christmas this year. Now, you could see some of my goofy grin in the video while he was opening, but let me just tell you this: watching Whit open that present on Christmas was approximately 417x more enjoyable for me than any present I *personally* opened. It was 200x more enjoyable for me than watching anybody *else* open the present I got *them*. Why is that? Because I'm Whit's dad, and I love *giving* Whit things. Because I'm his *dad*—that's why. There's just this inherent *joy* I get from giving Whit things that he *needs*, and yes—even things he *wants*. Like an alligator car wash. So much so, that here's what I caught myself doing the next couple days. Whit would be over there washing his Hot Wheels cars in this massive contraption, and I'd catch myself just inherently going "Whit, do you love that alligator car wash?" "Whit, are you having so much fun with that car wash?" And every time he could peel his attention away from playing with it for long enough to say the simple word "yes," my whole entire heart just warmed up. I loved every bit of it. Now, I'm aware that probably some of that comes from self-centeredness on my part. Some of my joy is probably wanting Whit to make much of me and Ana as the givers of the car wash. But I also think there's a lot of it that *isn't* that. I think **there's a lot of it that is just me, as Whit's dad, getting immense joy out of my kid asking me for something, and me having the ability to provide it for him. There was a part of me as a father that so loves, so enjoys providing for the needs and wants that my kid has.**

Now, here's what I think is one of our biggest hang-ups with prayer. **I think, deep down, we believe that God is more *different from that* than he is the same.** We believe that the desire to give his kids things, the joy earthly parents get from giving their kids things—that *that* is not a fatherly trait that God shares. We've chosen to believe, for probably a whole host of reasons, that God *isn't* anything like a father who watches his kids open presents on Christmas morning. And I think part of the point of this passage is to say no, *God is like that*. He *does* share that quality. God is a father, and fathers love kids asking them for things, and they love to give their kids things that they want. **God, your Father, wants you to ask for things. And not only that, he enjoys you asking for things. He enjoys hearing what you ask for, and providing what you ask.**

So I told you guys last week when we started this series that I very much need to grow in prayer alongside all of us. One thing that just struck me about a month ago as I was processing my need to pray is what my *motivation* was for prayer. I think my whole life, every time I have tried to grow in prayer, it has been because I felt like I *should* pray more. Every time I can remember, the line of thinking has been *I'm a Christian, and Christians should pray more than I currently pray. I'm a pastor, and pastors \*really\* should pray more than I currently pray.* Every time I tried to grow in prayer, it was motivated by feeling like I *should* pray more. And then it hit me about a month ago that **I had never started trying to pray more because God desires that I pray.** I had never thought much at all about how he *enjoys me praying*. I don't know that I had ever thought for long at all about God *wanting* me to ask him for things. I don't know that I had ever really seriously considered that **God is my Father and therefore gets joy from me praying and gets joy from answering my prayers.** And I don't know what it was, but that has in a lot of ways started to completely reframe prayer for me.

So let me just ask you, followers of Jesus who are fellow strugglers with prayer: have you ever considered that God *enjoys* you praying?<sup>2</sup> Not just that prayer is good and that you *should* pray, but rather that God is a father and fathers love giving their kids things? Like, they get *joy* from giving their kids things? Have you ever considered that the God of the bible is a God who *delights* in hearing from you, just because you're his *kid*? Because in my experience that right there will begin to *change* your posture towards prayer.

Now, not only do I think seeing God as Father changes our *desire to pray*, but I also think it changes *how* we pray. I can't help but think that a lot of our prayers probably don't sound like a kid asking their dad for something. A lot of times when we pray, we sound like we're tip-toeing through a field laced with theological landmines. "Father, we just thank you that you are good and you are gracious. And we just want to acknowledge that whatever you do in response to our prayer, you are still good and you are still gracious. But God we want to ask, if it's not too much and it's within your good and perfect will, that you would do this for us. God, we know that may not be *in* your will, but God if it is, we ask that you would do it. So God, if you see fit, if you did this for us, we would be extremely grateful and would be very diligent in worshiping *you* for what you did and not worshiping the thing you did for us. God we would be careful to not expect you to always work in that same way always and would worship you for who you are, not for what you've done." Does that sound familiar to any of you? Yeah, I've caught *myself* praying like that.

---

<sup>2</sup> This is much of what the Psalmist is describing when he depicts our prayers as being like "incense" before God in Psalm 141:2.

Now listen—I'm all for being theologically sound when we pray. Feel free to acknowledge when you pray that God's will is higher than ours and that he is worthy of being trusted. Nothing wrong with that at all. **But I can't help but think that some of us spend a lot more time qualifying what we ask for than we do actually asking. There's a way to be so concerned with theological precision in our prayers that we forget we're just talking to our Father.** Do you know how my son asks me for food? "Daddy, I hungry." Not "Father, I know you have a lot going on. And I just want to say up front that I know that if you don't give me what I want right now, you're still good and you're still powerful and you're still worth living in relationship with. And I know that you getting me what I want doesn't determine your affections for me. But I just want to ask, if it's not too much trouble and if it's within your perfect will as my father, that you might provide for me in your incredible grace a few chicken nuggets for me to eat and then in turn thank you for." He says exactly none of those things. He says "daddy, I hungry." Because he knows that I'm his dad, and at my core, I want to give him things that he needs. So he says "daddy, I hungry."

You know how I talk to *my* dad if we're in the same room? I just *start talking*. I don't plead to get his attention, I don't preface what I say with complex elaborate statements about who he is or about his relationship to me. I just start talking. I *might* start with the word "dad." That's it. And then I start talking, like he's a person, and like he's a person that wants to talk to me. Because he *is*, and he *does*. I would argue that's very much how we should talk to God if he's our father. **Let's acknowledge God for who he is. Let's acknowledge his incredible power. But let's not forget that at the end of the day, this is a conversation between us and our father.** Otherwise we risk doing precisely what Jesus says not to do in the gospels: "heaping up empty phrases because we think we'll be heard for our many words."

Okay here's another big one for a lot of us I think: does anyone else get *distracted* when they pray? Like just start praying, and 30 minutes later you're doing something else *entirely*, and you don't even remember *finishing* praying? And it just makes you feel like a failure in regards to prayer? Okay, think about even *that* through the lens of talking with your father. Do you ever get distracted when you're talking with your parents? I'll go ahead and answer that one for you: yes. Yes we do. We all have cell phones in our pockets, which means we all get distracted sometimes when talking to our parents. So what do we do when that happens? We realize we're distracted, we try to stop being distracted, and then we keep talking. We don't hang our heads in shame. We don't say "you know what mom, dad, I really need to work on never getting distracted when I talk to you, so let me go spend a few months getting better at that, and then I'll be worthy of starting a conversation with you." None of us do that. Because that's not the nature of our relationship with our parents. We don't need to be flawless at the art of conversation before we can talk to them. We just *start talking*. And over time, we learn how to talk *well*. But we don't learn that *apart* from talking to them—we do it *through* talking to them.

And here's one more: how should we talk to our Father when we've *messed up*? Like when we've just utterly blown it in some area of life, we've just given in completely to some sin, we've failed morally in some way or another—how do we talk to God in *those* moments? Now this is a tough one for a lot of us. Because I bet a lot of us grew up thinking we couldn't go talk to our parents after we had messed up. We were so convinced they would be mad, or disappointed, or blame themselves—or whatever it was. We felt like we couldn't talk to them when we had done things wrong at all. And I think we often project that experience with *our parents* onto God. So frequently, I hear people say things like: "I just don't feel like I *can* pray, because I *haven't* really been following Jesus well lately." Or "I just don't feel like I can ask God for help in this area because *I'm* the one who got myself into this mess." Or "I just don't feel like I can talk

to God about this because it's all my fault anyway." Or just simply, "I can't pray about this because I haven't prayed in a while." Have you ever thought things like that? I know / certainly have.

Okay, I want you to really listen to what I say next, because this is so, so important: **if you are a follower of Jesus, that is *not* the nature of your relationship with God.** That is *not* the nature of your relationship with him. That is *not* how God feels about you. That is *not* how God relates to you. God is your *Father*—which means **you can approach him when everything in your life is going great—and you can approach him when everything in your life is going awful and every bit of it is your fault. And you can approach him in every single type of scenario in between those types of scenarios.** There is *no length of time* you've gone *without* praying that disqualifies you from just starting to pray right now, today. There is no amount of *your-fault-ness* about the circumstances in your life that makes God disinterested in hearing from you. Listen, you're his *kid*. God *listens* to his *kids*. He *wants* to listen to his kids. It doesn't *matter* if they haven't talked to him in a while. It doesn't *matter* if they got themselves into whatever it is. None of that changes the fact that they *belong* to him.

And here's precisely why: because if you're a follower of Jesus, when you pray, you are praying in the *name* and *reputation* of Jesus. You know that phrase we always use at the end of our prayers, "in the name of Jesus"? That was actually never meant to be just some sort of casual, sign-off, throwaway line at the end of our prayers. **Praying "in the name of Jesus" means that you have the *Father's* attention because of what Jesus accomplished for you on the cross. Jesus *qualifies* you to pray, even when you feel like everything in your life *disqualifies* you.** Even in the moments when you feel like God would not, and will not, listen to someone like you—you get to approach God banking on the performance of *Jesus* in your place. That right there is all you need to pray. **You don't need a good track record, you don't perfect performance, you don't need to have a solid prayer life—all you need is the perfect performance of Jesus in your place.** And that is what you've been given through Jesus' death and resurrection. If you approach prayer in that "name," you *always* have God's attention.

And that's what Jesus is trying to get across in this passage: **that we should ask our Father for things because God is our Father through Jesus.** Jesus has *made that* true of us. John 1 says:

*Yet to all who did receive him [Jesus], to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become **children** of God...*

**Jesus' work on the cross "gave us the right" to become children of God. Despite everything else, despite however much or however little we believe that about ourselves, it *is true*.** And we get to pray as if it's true.

And so in light of that, repeatedly in the gospels, Jesus tells his disciples that they need to "become *like* little children." Why do you think that is? **Little children are helpless, and so they are completely dependent upon their father.** They are completely dependent on forces outside of themselves to provide everything they need. And there may be few things harder for us as twenty-first century Americans than feeling helpless. We hate it. We're allergic to it. Being helpless feels weak. It feels less-than-productive. But if we're going to get anywhere with prayer, we've got to *learn helplessness*.

Whit is convinced that every good thing in the world comes to him *through* me or Ana. If he wants something, he is convinced the first thing he should do is ask us for it. He has no plan B. If he *wants*

something, his solution is “ask my parents for it.” In fact, we were a little caught off guard when it seemed like he *had* a plan B. We were going through Target, and we hit the Hot Wheels aisle, which currently is his favorite aisle, obviously. And he found something he wanted. But because we are trying to teach Whit that life doesn’t consist of how much stuff you have, we told him we couldn’t get it that day. So then Whit says something surprising: he says “you no have to buy it daddy, *I* buy it.” To which we responded, “and where are you gonna get the money to buy it?” His response was “you give it to me.” My point is that Whit genuinely believes that everything he could ever want or ever need comes through me. In his mind I have the ability to acquire for him anything in the world.

I would submit to you that one of the primary reasons we don’t pray is because we have lost that mindset when it comes to God. We have begun to believe that with most things we want, and most things we need, we just need to *figure out* a way to get ourselves. Instead of even attempting to ask God. But if we’re gonna develop constant, vibrant prayer lives, we’re going to need to re-evaluate that belief. **We’re going to need to re-learn helplessness.**

And one way to *learn helplessness* is to *practice* it. We said when we started this series last week that “the things we do, do things to us.” Our habits—the things we do over and over and over again—those things over time *form* us into certain kinds of people. So, in light of that, if you started praying constantly *as if* you’re helpless and need God to act, do you know what I bet you’d start to realize over time? That you actually *are* helpless and you actually *do* need him to act.

So here’s what I want us to do as we close this thing out. I want us to take some time to *practice* this. I want us to practice relating to God as our Father through prayer. Before you finish listening to this podcast and get onto the next thing you’ve got to do, I’ve got just three short prayers that we’ll also post at the end of the teaching slides online. Each of them are based on Scripture, so we’ll put those references on there as well. But **I’d love it if we could just take some time to pray these, in our own way, back to God.** For some of you, you may want to pray just exactly, word-for-word, what’s on the slides—that’s fine. Others of you, these prayers may bring even more things to mind, and you can pray those things as well. But **I’d love for us to practice relating to God as a Father through prayer.** I’ll give you just a few moments between each one, but feel free to even just pause the podcast while you spend time praying through each one. But let’s spend some time praying through each of these, and then I’ll close us out together in prayer.

*Prayer #1:*

God, thank you that you relate to us like a good Father. Thank you that you can be trusted to give us what is good, always. (Matt. 7:9-11; James 1:17)

*Prayer #2:*

Thank you that you have made us sons and daughters through Jesus. Thank you that we can ask you for things regardless of our track record with you, because of Jesus. (John 1:12; Romans 8:15-17)

*Prayer #3:*

Father, help me relate to you like a child. Help me to learn helplessness. Help me interact with you as the creator and provider of all things. (Matthew 18:3; Luke 18:17)