

“Solid— The Greatest Power in the World”

Today we're continuing in the series called "Solid." What we've been doing is looking at a section of Jesus' concentrated teaching on how to have lives that are solid. Jesus taught this stuff that has some serious horse power, but he wanted to be sure that people took it the next step. He wanted to be clear that this is not about just learning facts; it's about putting them into action. He said, **“Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock” (Matthew 7:24, NRSV).**

Today, we come to Jesus' teachings on the subject of prayer. This is important stuff that affects every part of life. So, let's dive right into the text. Matthew 6, starting with verse 5, Jesus says, **“When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites. They love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly, I tell you, they have received their reward in full, but when you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father who is unseen. Then your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him” (Matthew 6:5-8, TNIV).**

Let's talk about prayer. Because, in one sense, everybody prays. Even people who think of themselves as atheists or agnostics, when they're surveyed, a majority of them will actually say, "There are times when I come to the end of my rope and I pray." We can't help ourselves. It's like we're wired to reach beyond ourselves at key moments of life that we know are beyond us.

When we're desperate, we call out for God. This is the human condition. People worry about prayer being eliminated from school. But we all know the truth that as long as there are tests in school, there will be prayer in school! Because when we reach the end of our rope, we reach out to God. But there has to be more to prayer than just desperation. You know, shot-from-the-hip kind of prayers. And Jesus wants us to experience a depth in prayer, and through prayer experience power for our lives. That's why Jesus taught about prayer. Remember this is not just some interesting stuff about prayer, it's meant to get us praying and praying with power.

If our prayer life is going to be real and be powerful we've got to know some foundational things. We've got to answer some foundational questions first. One very important question is **WHERE is God?** A key characteristic of God we need to internalize is that he is always with us. Just because you're not aware of him being with you, doesn't mean he's not there. Unfortunately we're really good at pretending he's not there, but I am never acting or speaking in the absence of God. The psalmist said, **“Where can I go from your Spirit, or where can I flee from your presence? If I go to the heavens, you are there. If I make my bed in the depths, you are there” (Psalm 137:7-8, NIV).** Wherever I go, there you are.

True confession time. How many of you suddenly drive differently when you see a police car? Now why do you do that? Is it because your heart is changed and you think, “Oh, yeah, I want to be a **good** driver”? NO! You don't want to get a ticket! You don't want those lights flashing in the rear view mirror. Well, see, God doesn't want you to live like that when it comes to him: Like you're going to run into him coming around a corner. Because this leads to some real goofy expressions of spirituality.

In seminary we always prayed before meals. We had a ritual before we prayed--I don't know where it got started, but it is very goofy. We would sit down at a table before a meal, and to determine who was going to pray, we would play the nose game. Everybody would touch their nose and whoever touched their nose last was the one who was going to pray. Then we would all bow our heads and that person would say, "Oh God, we love you so much, it's so good to pray to you!" Think about this! God must be up in heaven saying, “Hey, if it's so good to pray to me, how come the loser of the nose game is always the one that has to do it?” Because it was like, in our minds, when we're playing the nose game, God is not watching. God doesn't know what's going on. Then when we go to pray, then all of a sudden, he's there.

Sometimes we live with this bizarre kind of spiritual insanity where it's like God is not around until I choose to talk to him. This is especially true any time I sin; I have to at least make myself think that God is not there. So we need to get clear that we're not in God's presence just when we pray. We are always with him, just sometimes we pretend like we're not.

So we need to be clear about the question: Where is God? And we also need to answer another foundational question: **WHO is God?** Because if we think that God is an angry old man in the sky who's ready to let you have it at your first slip; or a cranky miser that you've got to coerce into giving you something, if that's who you think God is, that's going to shape how you pray.

Some people think the God of the universe is fickle and likes to trick us. They say, "Be careful what you pray for..." as if God might answer your prayer but do something sneaky in the process. Like God says, "I'll give you what you want, and that will be your undoing!"

Is that the God we're praying to? This answer is no, no, no. That's why Jesus said this, "**Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Those who seek, find, and to those who knock, the door will be opened. Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone, or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake. If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask?**" (Matthew 7:7-11, TNIV). How great is our God!

Watch this: The message of Jesus, the message of scripture is that God will answer our prayers in his own way, but it will be the way of perfect wisdom and perfect love. God is not a miser you need to coerce, or a fickle God who wants to mock you by answering your prayers with some painful twist. If we love our children, God's love is beyond that. So listen, if you need to let go of some wrong images of God, let them go. Jesus is saying, "This is who you are praying to. The God who will answer all your prayers with wisdom and love."

So once we figure out who we're praying to, then we can pray expecting something to happen. And we can begin to pray in productive ways. This is where Jesus begins to teach about how, how to pray. Not just so we know how to pray, but so that we actually pray.

One of the first things he teaches is one of the most important when it comes to prayer. He said, "When you pray, don't pray like the hypocrites." He's saying, **Pray authentically.** Pray sincerely. Bring the real you before the real God because God knows the real you anyhow.

Lots of us spend a lot of energy in image-management when we're around other people. We want to shape how the other person perceives us. Most people want to be liked so when they're in the presence of someone they don't know well or feel they need to impress, they carefully manage their image in the presence of another person.

Now I bring God into the picture. The reality is I am never in this situation with God. I never have to worry about image-management with God. He already sees right through me. He already knows my real self. And I'm told over and over that he still loves me. So Jesus says, "Now, when you pray, don't be like the hypocrites. Don't think it's about saying lots and lots of words like the pagans. Just pray authentically. The real you from your heart."

Then this is part of why he goes to the next point. Sometimes, **Pray privately** When you pray privately, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father who is unseen. Get away from all these people. It's real good to pray with people sometimes, but when I'm praying and there are other people listening, sometimes because I am aware they are listening, it changes how I pray, and it's real good to just go pray alone with the Father. Go into your room. Close the door. The idea is to find alone time with God.

Now you have to decide what your room is. John Ortberg talks about a survey that was done where people were asked the question, "What is your favorite room in the house?" The top answer overall was the kitchen. People love that one. Most husbands, their top answer was the bedroom. Anybody want to guess what the top answer was for mothers of young children? What was their favorite room in the house? The bathroom! Why? Yeah, you lock the door. Keep those ankle-biters out of there for at least a couple of minutes. Keep that husband out of there for at least a couple of minutes.

That's what Jesus was getting. Find that place. Over time, it will become kind of a Holy space for you. I have my inside place and my outside place, depending on the weather. The irony is that when we're alone we find a presence. Find that place.

What else does Jesus teach us about prayer? Jesus goes on and gives us the Lord's Prayer. One of the things he's teaching us in the Lord's Prayer is, **Pray humbly**. Talk to God about what it is that you really want. Jesus says talk to him about your daily bread, give us this day, here is what I need, God. Paul says, "**Don't be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, present your request to God**" (Philippians 4:6). The most remarkable word there is "everything." Anything that you are concerned about, talk to God about it.

You see, there's a depth of humility in asking, seeking, knocking. When we go to God asking and seeking and knocking it is a humble confession that we can't do it all. For me it's an admission that I am not smart enough, or creative enough, or connected enough, or gifted enough, or even faithful enough to figure out life and how to live it. I need God, so I ask, and seek, and knock.

Jesus says one more thing about prayer. **Pray boldly**. There is a word that keeps coming in Jesus' teachings. I wish there was a way to imprint it on all of our hearts. Jesus says pray to your Father. Jesus says your Father will reward you. Jesus says your Father knows what you need. Jesus says pray, "Our Father who art in heaven." Jesus says we give gifts, how much more will our Father give them. He is our Father.

As a dad, I love to give to my kids. And I want to give them the best. I don't give them everything they ask for because if I did that, they wouldn't know the value of working to achieve something themselves and I want to give them that as well. But I love to give to my kids, to provide for them and to do that as wisely as I can. I can anticipate some of my kids' needs, but I even like it when they ask and then we figure out together if we can make that happen. Zoe wants to go snow skiing with me, just the two of us in Colorado. She has asked boldly, and I really want to make that happen. She's also asked for a dog. That is not going to happen.

Because of who God is, a wise and loving Father, we can ask boldly, and together with God we see if it can happen. But there are some things we need to be aware of when we ask, when we pray. You may have heard me say before that God will not answer a prayer if it violates certain principles. God will not violate the principle of free will. No matter how boldly you ask God to make somebody love you, he will not violate their free will to do that. He will not violate the principle of personal responsibility. He's not going to give you an A on a test you didn't study for, he will not take the consequence away if you're caught stealing from work. He'll be with you through the consequences, but he will not make them go away. And God rarely violates the laws of nature he established. When he does that's very rare and it's called a miracle. But even with those limitations pray boldly.

Janet and I always pictured us being a family of 4. Our first daughter, Zoe, came along without any trouble. But having a second child wasn't happening. Don't get me wrong, we did our part, but nothing. We both got checked out. No problems. After trying for a year we got help medically, no success. We said that we'd try that route for a year. Every month would come and go. Every month, heartbreak. Of course we prayed boldly for a second child.

One thing we never did was talk about adoption. Adoption was really just kind of scary to us. We'd heard the stories of adoptions that fell through or birth mothers changing their minds after the fact. It just really wasn't in our realm of experience or comfort. But after that second year I began to pray, "God, you know our hearts' desires about our family. You've heard our prayers. It's not working our way. You know that we're scared about adoption. So many unknowns. But if that's what you want, I'm open, but here's the deal: if you want us to adopt, you're going to have to put a baby in front of us. I mean literally in front of us, not figuratively." I began to pray that prayer off and on.

Then one Sunday in January 2006 a member of our church who is a foster parent walks in before the 11:00 service with a baby carrier. Picture this: She walks right up me, extends her arms with the baby and says, "Aaron, you and Janet need to adopt this baby." She said, "He's four weeks old, he's such a good baby and I just felt this morning as I thought about him, that you and Janet should adopt him." I don't really know what I said in those next few moments. I was kind of in shock.

She then took the baby and made a beeline to Janet and did the same thing. That afternoon we called her and found out that the baby's guardian lawyer was good a friend and church member. We called him and

talked to him about the whole process. We talked for a couple of days and realized that it just couldn't happen. Those foster parents ended up adopting him.

We didn't talk about it at all for several weeks and then Janet and I made a date and went to Crabby's, had a long dinner and talked about it. That was sometime in March. At that dinner we decided to pursue adoption internationally. Janet started doing research into various agencies we began to pray that God would bring our family and a baby together.

One afternoon in mid April, Janet and Zoe happened to stop by after school to see me in my office and out of the blue that attorney friend dropped by and asked if he could talk to all three of us. We had no clue what he wanted. He said, "A mother has contacted me and wants to place her baby for adoption. She's due at the end of May you're the first people who came to my mind. Are you interested?" We all three said, "Yes! Yes! Yes!" We started the process that day.

Everything fell into place miraculously. One of the biggest parts of adopting is the home study. It's a detailed process that usually takes months. It includes background checks, FBI fingerprint checks, financial checks, notarized references, interviews with Janet, and Zoe, and me individually, an on-site home visit, physical exams from our doctors, pages and pages of written responses to questions. In the middle of it all, I took a trip to Nicaragua. Listen, what normally takes months took 11 days. The home study was finished on a Friday. That next Sunday, our attorney friend came into church and whispered to Janet that the baby had been born, three weeks early. We didn't have a bed, or any diapers, or any formula. The room wasn't ready. But we were.

We look back and it seems as if God was saying, "I have plans for you, if you will just let me, I have plans. I have heard your prayers, I know your hearts, and I have plans." It was like as soon as we said "yes," God was ready saying, "Finally! I thought you'd never ask."

Pray boldly. Prayer puts us in the flow of what God wants to do. That phrase, ask, seek, knock. In the original language it means **keep** asking, **keep** seeking, **keep** knocking. Even when it seems like nothing is happening, the relationship with God is happening. Prayer changes things; it changes us, but knowing about prayer is not enough. It's time for us to be praying people.

There are some things I want you to think about. Please don't cop on this, play along for minute. Get specific about prayer. On your notes write some things down. Complete the sentences, "If I were to pick a place to pray daily it would be...." Visualize that place, write it down. If you can't visualize that place, how might you create it? A comfortable chair, a light, a small table.

Now think about this: "If I were to pick a time every day to pray it would be this 15 minute chunk." Write that time down right now. Visualize what it takes to make that a part of your everyday life. Going to bed a little early. Getting up a little early. When is it. And then this: "This is how I would want to use this time..." And then complete this, "This is what I would expect from that time..."

Let's do this. It's not magic. Prayer is simply the way to be in loving relationship with your heavenly Father. Let's do this. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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