



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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"If I Believe..."

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A Prayer,

God, our Father, we know you are here. We know you are love. We know you want for us all the joy and fullness of life that we can possibly experience. And now, as we share in this time of worship and meditation, speak to our hearts and speak to our spirits through the things said and done. May we be able to receive the message you bring for our instruction and for the enriching of our lives, through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

The intent of this sermon is to look at the issue of believing and to see the difference what we believe makes in our lives. We will look at the issue in terms of the following scripture.

He (Jesus, of course,) was praying in a certain place, and when he ceased one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." And he said to them, "When you pray, say, 'Father, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, give us each day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us, and lead us not into temptation. '"

Then he said to them, "Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, give me three loaves, for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey and I have nothing to set before him.' And he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me. The door is now shut and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, though he will not get up and give, him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity, he will rise and give him whatever he needs.

"And I tell you, ask and it will be given you, seek and you will find, knock and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives, and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it will be opened.

"What father among you, if his son asks for a fish will instead of a fish, give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg will give him a scorpion? If you then who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who asks him." (Luke 11.1-13)

As I search for the message in this scripture, the first thing that comes to mind is that, on first reading, it seems a little odd for Jesus to teach his disciples a prayer and then start to talk about asking, and seeking and knocking. I wonder how those two go together, and what we can make of it.

Insofar as I can tell, people generally believe that praying is primarily an asking process. It is petition and intercession. "Oh yes," we think, "let's be sure to include some praising of God and some thanksgiving." Nonetheless, it appears that, when people begin to think about praying, they think mostly about asking for something. So maybe it fits for Jesus to tell this story about the friend who comes at midnight to seek some loaves of bread, and then makes the point which is our text, "Ask and it will be given you, seek and you will find, knock and it will be opened to you." (Luke 11.9)

What is the point of that statement? What does it say to us?

What it says to me depends upon what I believe.

To try to be clear about what I am seeking to say, I want to give two fairly long illustrations. I want to put the story in two different settings. You, of course, will decide what you believe and how it all fits for you.

If I believe that God is a sovereign ruler, a person, an entity, a being out yonder somewhere who is waiting for me, and indeed demanding of me that I come to Him and make my petition before He responds to me; if I believe God is that kind of God; if I believe God is all powerful and can do anything He chooses to do; then I see God as saying, "If you want anything from me, come asking, come seeking, come knocking and somewhere along the way you'll find out how I respond to your asking, and seeking, and knocking."

The picture is something like this: God is sitting on his throne – we say in heaven. And God holds in His hands all power to do with and for me whatever He chooses to do. It's up to me to figure out how to be in relationship with this God sitting there on His throne, holding court, as it were. It's up to me to figure out how to come into His presence; how to go about the living of my life; how to do and say what will result in God doing for me what I want Him to do, or desperately need for Him to do, or fervently wish that He would do.

So quite properly, when I'm feeling as if things are going along pretty well, I say, "Thank you, God." I do it with humility, and bowed head, trying to make it clear to God that I really am thankful so that, maybe, He will be attuned to my asking. And then, in my need, in my desire, in my desperateness, I begin to lay before God the things that are bothering me, seeking for God to do something about it. I ask, I seek, I knock. And maybe, if I come at Him often enough, I'll get through and God will do for me what I would like for Him to do. Maybe God will bail me out. Maybe God will take care of the situation. Maybe God will heal me. Maybe God will fix the problem. If I just petition Him enough; if I just ask earnestly enough; if I just keep on seeking; if I knock, and knock, and knock; maybe God will hear me and heed my request.

If I believe God is the kind of God I was describing, then that's how I believe that God intends for me to pray.

As you think about the picture I have described, how do you feel? How does it sound? How do you like it? I have no idea.

No, I shouldn't say I have no idea. I do have some idea what you believe, although I may be incorrect. As I observe and experience this world of which I am a part, it appears a lot of people seem to believe much as I have described. They believe, therefore, that this text is admonishing us to say to God, "God, I want." "Please do for me." "I come seeking and petitioning." "I knock at your door." "Take care of me." "Do for me." "Fix things for me." And in the process, if I'm in that position, I feel that God neither loves nor respects me, and that God – if that's the kind of God in whom I believe – doesn't think that I have any real ability to do anything, nor to meet any responsibility, except to petition Him to do for me whatever I have asked Him to do.

By and large, I don't want anyone to deal with me in such a way – not even God. I want more respect than that. I want more acceptance of my capacity and ability to meet the responsibilities of my life. Such are my reactions if I believe God is a sovereign ruler demanding that I come to Him with my petitions before He will respond.

Now, let's look at another belief system and see how that may bear upon the scripture passage.

Let us suppose that I do indeed believe God is loving Father, that He never withdraws from us, His loved ones, and that He never stops loving. And, that also, I understand – I believe – God knows all about me. There is really no way I can hide from God. In fact, there is no need for me to hide because I knew God loves me.

It is true that sometimes I make mistakes. Sometimes I choose to do things that I know are not the wisest things to do, or as thoughtful, or considerate, or as loving as they might be. But in this belief system, I am sure God loves me no matter what. And that, in that love, God expects and assumes that I'm going to confront my responsibilities in life; lay hold of my opportunities in life; do those kinds of things that enrich and enhance the life around me as well as my own life; live out what it means to love as God loves.

If it is in my belief system that God loves me no matter what, what meaning do I give to the words, "Ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and it will be opened to you." What does the statement mean under those circumstances? Under that belief system, God doesn't need for me to ask Him for anything, nor to seek anything from Him, nor to knock at His door. Our relationship is intact. It's complete. It's O.K. I don't need to do anything to keep God in the relationship.

So what does it mean? What might it mean?

It just might mean that this loving God loves me so much that He keeps opening to me the instructions and the guidelines for how to live the life that I have the capacity to live. Maybe what Jesus is saying is, "It's not somebody else's responsibility to solve your problem nor to resolve your concern. Other people are involved for the purpose of

support, of caring, of relating, of encouragement, and all that goes with these things, but it isn't somebody else's task to take on your responsibility and carry it out."

If God is love as I am expressing in this belief system, maybe Jesus' intent is to encourage me – to encourage us – to get with it; to get with the opportunities that are ours; to make use of the resources that God has given us; to learn God's instructions; and to get on into the life experience, having assurance that we are able to be who God has created us to be.

I hear Jesus saying to me in the belief structure of love, "Ask, and it will be given you; make known what it is that you're asking for. Don't leave me, God, or somebody else in the dark about what you want. Ask, make it known, so that the resources are there to put it together if that's the thing to do."

Of course, the three statements are somewhat redundant, but, in the process, they emphasize and underscore Jesus' message.

Go seeking!

Now and then, people come to me with a problem to which they want a solution. Often they seem inclined to believe that what they are to do is to lay the problem before me and I will either do something about it or tell them what to do.

Often people are not satisfied with my response for I don't undertake to do anything about the problem, nor tell people what to do.

There's a big reason for that response. It is because your problem is your problem, not mine. Your concern is your concern, not mine. Your need is your need, not mine. The opportunity to do something about all this is your opportunity, not mine. And God has created you with the capacity to look at and to understand; to see what the alternatives are and to decide what you will do; to pick up the responsibility and act on it. It is your responsibility, not your obligation. It is your opportunity, your gift from God, not something imposed on you.

So go seek the ways for putting your life together as God would have you do it. Work through the particular concern or problem with which you're dealing at this present time. Work out the situation and make it richer and better for you and those with whom you share. Seek for the ways, knowing that God loves you all the way; that God is with you all the way; that God is encouraging you all the way; and that God has instructed you as to your resources and ability.

Don't go knocking at God's door for God to do something. Go knocking at the doors of opportunity out there to see if you can get them open, and to get done the things you have opportunity to do.

One of the things I believe about God is that God never invades or intrudes upon my life. God has too much respect for me and for Himself to do that. But God is present, and I can open the way for me to know that God is present, and loving, and instructing, and supporting. Somebody else doesn't open the door for me. I do it for myself.

In a belief system based on God's love, this text takes on an entirely different meaning. Jesus, having taught his disciples about praying, underscores and assures them of the nature and kind of relationship that exists between them and their creator who loves them unconditionally.

With that assurance, he says, "Know that God is with you. Know that God cares about you. Know that God has supplied you with all that you need to live this life wholly and completely. Go out into the world and live it! Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and everyone who seeks, finds; and everyone who knocks; it opens to him."

This is a challenge, an invitation to pick up the opportunity that God has given each of us, and to live it out day by day.

The last line of the passage of scripture says, "Know how much more your heavenly Father gives you the Holy Spirit." Asking, seeking, knocking – the measure of the extent and scope of the love of God for each of us is in the gift of the Holy Spirit. If I believe the Holy Spirit has, indeed, been given me, I ask, and seek, and knock, confident that from my resources I will receive and find, and discover the door open to me.

Let us pray: God, our Father, over and over and over and over again you have disclosed to us both the scope of your love, the nature of your love, and its everlastingness. And sometimes we will not allow ourselves to believe that you love us so completely. May it be this day that we move yet another step toward full acceptance and believing that you love us as you do, and that we have the capacity to be all you have created us to be in this life, after the manner and the example of the Lord, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.