

Mt 7:9-11 Fathers' Day

Tim Anderson 1/9/2019

Happy Fathers' Day to all you dads out there.
I've got some sad Father's Day news for you.
Fatherhood is at a low ebb in our community.
I'm not telling you anything you didn't already know, am I?
Some Primary Schools have stopped running
what used to be the obligatory Fathers' Day stall.
Now I don't mourn the loss of the Fathers' Day stall.
Why should my kids have to waste their time,
queuing up to spend my money buying me junk that I don't want?
I loved the time when one of my kids gave me \$5 for Fathers' Day.
"Dad, I looked really hard through everything at the stall at school.
I really did try, Dad.
And I knew there was just nothing you would like.
So I decided to give you the money that Mum gave me to spend."
Y'know, as a Father, your heart swells with pride.
"Hey this kid is just like me."
There is a great feeling of joy
when you think you have succeeded at reproducing yourself.
We all know we are going to die.
It's lovely to think that there's something of my imprint
left in the next generation.
And if you don't have children,
you can still leave your imprint in the next generation.
Form close friendships with people a generation younger than you,
and mentor them.
But I digress.
I do not grieve the loss of the Fathers' Day stall.
But I do grieve the reason that some schools aren't running them.
You see they aren't thinking,
"All we are doing is promoting a consumerist society
teaching our children that love is about cheap trinkets."
No. They are thinking,

"There are so many kids in our school
that have no one to give a present to.
And they feel excluded and left out when we run a Fathers' Day stall.
We better not run one anymore."
Truly Fatherhood is at a low ebb in our community.

And yet despite the fact
that fatherhood is at a low ebb in the community,
I know some great Dads.
I know Dads who put long term effort and dedication
into loving their kids.
I know Dads who bring up kids who are not their own
as if they were their own.
I know Dads who make real sacrifices -
not doing things they would love to do
in order to give their children opportunities.
I know Dads who have brought up children on their own
after the death or desertion of their wife.
I know of Dads who behave better than they otherwise would
because they want to be a good example to their kids.
I know of Dads who read the Bible with their kids.
I know of Dads who pray with their kids.
And I know of Dads who work hard on their marriage relationship
even when it is very difficult
because they know that is the best thing for their kids.
There are some great Dads out there.
And some of you here this morning are great Dads.

7:9 Jesus says,
"Which of you, if your son asks for bread will give him a stone?"
You get the picture.
Back then the flour was not bleached white.
So a little bread roll looked pretty similar
to a stone in the same shape as the bread roll.
So which father would think to himself,

"Hey I know a great joke.
I'll put a stone on my child's plate tonight instead of a bread roll.
That will really be a great prank."
It's not funny, is it?
You wouldn't do that.
Even those of us who have done the old,
"Look at the spider" trick.
And then nicked something off our child's plate,
which I have done,
we always give the food back to the kid after they've realised the joke.
But what about an even funnier joke.
7:10 "Which of you if your son asks for a fish will give him a snake?"
That's not funny at all.
It makes me recoil in horror.
Think of the most evil person you have ever heard of.
Sadaam Hussein, Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler.
Would they give their children a snake on their plate instead of a fish?
No. Not even they would do that.
I read a story in the news this week about Prince Andrew,
he's probably been up to some pretty dodgy stuff.
Certainly he's been keeping some pretty dodgy company.
But his own daughters - Eugenie and Beatrice -
well he makes sure they are treated like princesses.
Even the worst of us like to do the right thing by our children.

Jesus is making a point.
If even Sadaam Hussein, Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler and Prince Andrew
would treat their own children well,
how much more a loving heavenly father.
Surely God will treat his children well!
Well we'll get there.
But we must take a moment to pause,
even on fathers' day,
and acknowledge that it doesn't always work like that.
Jesus might have presumed that Fathers try to do the best for their kids.

Maybe that was the almost universal experience in first century Israel.
And most of us have that experience.
My Dad is not perfect.
But he tries to do the best he can for his kids.
Always has.
For most of us that is our experience.
But for some of us it is not.

There are appalling cases of neglect and abuse out there.
And for some people,
that means that their image of 'father' is permanently spoiled.
What do we do with that?
Well raging against your father or men in general won't fix the problem.
Raging against God because he gave you such a pathetic father
won't fix the problem.
But embracing the father who won't let you down,
that can be the source of healing
for those who are very damaged by their father.

Julian Lennon is the son of Beatles great John Lennon.
Here are Julian's words about his father.
"He walked out the bloody door and was never around.
I'd admire him on TV, listen to his words and opinions.
But for someone who was praised for peace and love,
and wasn't able to keep that at home.
That's hypocrisy.
The only thing he ever taught me was how not to be a father."
When you hear that,
can you hear how much Julian needs to know his heavenly father?
If you've had an inadequate father,
the best news is that you have a loving heavenly father.
If your father was absent like Julian Lennon's,
then your heavenly father is always present.
24 hours a day you can speak to him.
He's never too busy.

If your father was distant,
your heavenly father is close.
He holds you in his arms.
If your father was demanding,
your heavenly father's yoke is easy and his burden is light.
If your father always blamed you when things went wrong,
you have a heavenly father who sent his Son to take the blame.
If your father was abusive,
your heavenly Father is full of tender love.

And if you are like me,
a father who hears the stab of accusation from the evil one
when a list like that is read out.
Then it's great to know that your children have a heavenly father.
I pray that God enables me to be a good Dad.
But if I fall short,
no, when I fall short,
there is a true and perfect Father
who will never let my children down.

7:9-10

"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?"

When Jesus said those words,
he wasn't actually trying
to give ministers a text for a Father's Day sermon.

So why did he say them?

He was trying to encourage us to pray.
He was trying to encourage us to ask God for things.

7:11 "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 him."

Even though we know that we don't measure up,
whether as fathers or in any other way actually,

we wouldn't normally say that we are evil.
But Jesus just presumes that everyone is evil.
Because he measures us by the standard of God's perfection.
Am I evil by the standard of God's perfection?
Yes I am.
But though I'm evil,
I do try to give good gifts to my children.
Jesus' point is,
if I do it,
then of course God will do it.
He will give good gifts to his children.
So ask him!

Why don't we pray?
My kids are not shy in asking me for some chocolate or an icecream.
Why don't we ask God for stuff?
I mean it could be that I'm misjudging you.
Maybe you are far more diligent in prayer than I'm giving you credit for.
I just know that when we have a prayer meeting
at 5pm on a Sunday night,
a good attendance is 1/3 of the attendance at our 8am service.
Maybe you are diligent at praying at home.
But the people who research these things
tell us that this generation of Christians prays
less than our forebears did.
We have a loving heavenly father,
why don't we ask him for stuff?
Does that sound a bit like I've narrowed the focus of prayer too much?
Maybe we should be adoring God's unblemished character in prayer.
Maybe we should be praising him for his wonderful plan of salvation.
Maybe we should be thanking him
for his generous provision of all our needs.
Maybe we should be confessing our sins to him,
acknowledging our brokenness,
praising him for the full forgiveness we have in Jesus.

Surely prayer is not just asking God for stuff!
Well if that's what you were thinking,
you are absolutely right.
Prayer is more than just asking for stuff.
But it includes asking for stuff.
And my concern is that we aren't even asking God for stuff.
Let alone praying those deeper and more spiritual prayers.
And Jesus says,
"Your Father in heaven will give good gifts to those who ask him."
Jesus is talking about asking for stuff.
And we struggle to motivate ourselves to do even that.
Why?

Is it because we think it's rude to pester him?
I mean if my kids go on and on about icecream,
eventually I decide that they are nagging.
I've had enough.
But God has never had enough.
He has unlimited patience.
He can listen to everyone in the world praying at the same time.
In fact Jesus tells the parable of the widow pestering the unjust judge
to show us that we ought to be persistent in prayer.

Do we think that God shouldn't need to be told?
God already knows what we need.
He already knows what is best for us.
So why do we need to ask him for it?
We don't ask God because he needs the information.
But God waits until we recognise our need
and turn to him humbly.
Sometimes your children need some help,
but you wait until they ask.
You know, a child might be learning to drive a car.
And they've had 5 goes at reversing out of the car port.
But you don't rush in to tell them the mistake they're making.

One reason for that is that they might not appreciate the help until they recognise they need it.

Do we actually think that prayer is unnecessary?

I think this is close to the truth for many of us.

We look around us and see plenty of people whose lives seem to get along fine without prayer.

Christian parents who are struggling with infertility look at the non Christian who just falls pregnant.

How come I've got to pray, when they never pray and God gives them the baby I so desire?

It is true that

"He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."

But that's not to say that God doesn't hear our prayers in the everyday things of life.

Even within our church,

we have the testimony of people

who have prayed for healing when they had incurable illness and have been granted healing.

Prayer is never a waste of time.

But in some areas of life,

the spiritual blessings we long for,

we need to pray hard.

If you want to grow in the fruit of the Spirit,

love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness and the rest,

it's not going to happen like the sun rising on the evil and the good.

For spiritual blessings,

you are going to need to come before the Lord,

and unless your experience is vastly different from mine,

you are going to need to come before him repeatedly.

Suppose you are subject to a certain temptation.

And you pray to God to take it away.

He may answer your prayer.

But I'm guessing,

you'll be praying about it again tomorrow.

Do we actually think that prayer doesn't work?

This can take a number of forms.

Some people think

that God has wound the world up like an old fashioned watch.

He's pretty much left it to its own devices.

He's not going to intervene.

Some people think

that prayer is entirely about what happens inside of you.

If it affects the world,

that's because it has changed your heart and your attitude to the world.

Well there's no doubt that God can work through your prayer to change your own heart.

You might find a person really annoying.

You know that the right thing to do is to pray for them.

So you do.

"Please God, change that really annoying person!"

And God may well answer your prayer by changing your heart.

He may enable you to appreciate the really annoying person without them needing to change at all.

In that sense prayer does change the pray-er.

But we must not limit prayer to that.

What does Jesus say

a couple of verses before he starts talking

about the good gifts a father gives his children?

'Ask and it shall be given to you;

seek and you will find;

knock and the door will be opened to you.'

This is not about training in assertiveness

in asking your boss for a pay rise.

This is about prayer.

It's Jesus telling us that God hears and answers prayer.

'Your Father in heaven gives good gifts to those who ask him!'

So what do we make of the times that we've asked the Lord,
pleaded with the Lord
and nothing has happened?
You might have prayed desperately for a sick friend and they died.
You might pray every day for your spouse or children to come to faith
and they just aren't interested.
You might have prayed that God would save the world
from your most unfavourite politician being elected,
and they won the election.
Well we have to understand
that we don't have the wisdom to run the universe.
You might have seen the film Bruce Almighty.
Jim Carrey gets to be God for a week.
And disaster strikes because he just says yes to every prayer.
Well that's how it would be, right?
If God did exactly as we asked,
it would be an unmitigated disaster.
We don't have the wisdom to know what's best.
"Which of you if his son asks for bread will give him a stone?"
None of us hopefully.
But what if he asks for a stone?
You aren't going to let him break his teeth.
Imagine the dentist's bills!
Even though he's asked for a stone,
you need to give him bread anyway.
And that is what God does.
He gives us those things that are best for us.

Well it's time to finish up.
I'm looking out this father's day on a bunch of imperfect fathers.
And those of you who are not imperfect fathers
had or have imperfect fathers.
So where do we turn?
We turn to the perfect Father.
The one whom we can always approach in prayer.

The one who answers our prayers.
The one who always gives us what is best for us.
He won't give you a stone if you ask for bread.
But he will give you bread if you ask for a stone.
And he will work in your lives
and the lives of your children, fathers,
if you spend some time in prayer.