

Speaker 1: Thank you Todd and thank you choir. There's an old saying that says, when you sing, you pray twice. I think we just prayed like four times there. I think we did all that. I'm not exactly sure how that math works. Todd also mentioned the situation going on here in the city of Fort worth and I received an email yesterday from mayor price, uh, asking us as her church, asking me, as her pastor, uh, to invite us to encourage all of us to join together in praying, uh, in response to this horrible situation, this tragedy. And so I would invite you over the next few days and weeks to pray for the woman who was killed at Tatyana Jefferson, for her family, for the entire African American community here in the city of Fort worth. I would invite you to pray for the police department and for all of the city leaders and above all else pray for this city that we know and that we love.

Speaker 1: And so I would invite you to join with me over the next few days and weeks. As I said earlier, we are continuing our series this morning. About moving forward in our faith, recognizing as I've said before, that God loves us as we are but loves us way too much to let us stay this way, that the gospel is always moving us forward. Rob bell refers to this as the divine pull, that God is always constantly inviting us forward to take the next step, both in our lives and in our faith. Uh, you've probably figured out by now that this series coincides with our annual giving campaign. You'll be hearing more about that in a few moments. Uh, probably received some mail this last week about that. Uh, you may have noticed and if you haven't yet, please know that you will, that we, or taking a different approach in this campaign, this, this campaign is designed to bring the focus of stewardship back to where it belongs, which is our need to give over.

Speaker 1: The churches need to receive stewardship, generosity. That is a spiritual issue. And so rather than worrying about growing the budget, we're going to worry about growing spiritually. And that's what this is all about. Today's text is from Matthew's gospel, from a section of the gospel known as the sermon on the Mount. Matthew five, six, and seven. Those chapters, they make up the largest teaching of, uh, Jesus's ministry. And many scholars believe that the sermon on the Mount is sort of the essential Jesus, the cliff notes version of the gospel. And in the section that you'll be hearing this morning, Jesus is talking about prayer. He's giving us an invitation to prayer. Now, prayer as we know, is central to what it means to be a person of faith. But it's been my experience and almost 30 years of ministry. It's the one thing that most of us struggle with more than anything else.

Speaker 1: And so if that's, you know, know that you're not alone in that. In fact, Barbara Brown Taylor, the Episcopalian priest, one of the top 10 preachers in the world, and I'm not even sure who number two is behind her, but she wrote a book a number of years ago called an altar in the world. And she confessed this. She said, I'm a failure when it comes to prayer. When someone asks me about my prayer life, my mind starts scrambling to find ways to hide my problem. I start talking about other things that I do, hoping to sound like a godly person. I try to say smart things about prayer, so they did. They don't wonder if I think it's important or that I don't pray or ask the person about their prayer life, hoping in that moment that they won't notice that I've changed the subject. The truth is this, she said, I would rather show someone my checkbook stubs than talk about my prayer life. I would rather confess that I struggle with my weight than to admit that I

am a prayer weakling. And then she says this to say that I love God, but I don't pray very much. It's like saying I love life, but I don't breathe very much. So this morning church, we're going to talk about prayer.

Speaker 2: [inaudible]

Speaker 3: the gospel according to Matthew chapter seven verses seven through 11 ask and it will be given to you search and you will find knock and the door will be open for you, for everyone who asks receives. And for everyone who searches, finds and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who if your child asks for bread will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, we'll give a snake. If you then who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your father in heaven give good things to those who ask him the word of God for the people of God?

Speaker 1: This week as I was getting ready for children's Sabbath, I pulled out one of my favorite books from my shelf. It's called simply children's letters to God and it's letters. They're prayers really from children. Here are a few of my favorites. This one from a little girl by the name of Joyce, so dear God, thank you for my baby brother, but what I asked for was a puppy. I've never asked for anything before you can look it up. She says, Alison, a great question. She said, God, I've read the Bible. What does begat mean? No one will tell me. Anita says, God, is it true that my father won't get into heaven if he uses his golf words in the house?

Speaker 2: [inaudible]

Speaker 1: I love this one from Nancy. Dear God, I bet it's very hard for you to love all of everybody in the whole world. There are only four people in my family and I can never do it. I love this one, the short simplicity of it. Dear God, please send Dennis Clark to a different summer camp this year and then really this one from Frank is really a prayer on behalf of all of us. Dear God, I'm doing the best I can. Really?

Speaker 2: Okay.

Speaker 1: I love those prayers in part because there is something wonderful about the innocence, about the simplicity, about the sincere honesty. Think about how the world might be different if all of us approached God with that same earnestness, but that same sense of humility and curiosity. The truth is we all have questions. We all have concerns. We all have yearnings and desires. We have wishes that we ask of God and those questions, those prayers, they sort of shape us and mold us. They shape and mold our faith and all of that guides our lives in the way in which we live. In many ways. That's what this entire series, this discipleship journey is all about with our lives grounded in gratitude, we are simply asking, God, God, what is it that you want to do through me? What do you want to do through me based on your goodness in my life?

Speaker 1: Where do you want me to be? In my giving? I said last week, quoting Meister Eckhart, that if the only prayer that you ever say in your whole life is, thank you, that that would

be enough and while maybe that's true, the more I've thought about it this week, the more that I came to the realization that that's true to a point. Then I think if we're going to take the next step, this prayer, the prayer that I just mentioned a minute ago is the one that we should be praying every day. God, what do you want to do through me? Not just in terms of this generosity campaign, but in all of life. Can you imagine how your life might be different if the first prayer that you prayed before you got out of bed, before your feet even hit the floor? If you were to say, God in the next day, in the day in front of me, how do you want to work through me? What do you want to do through?

Speaker 1: Can you imagine how that might shape our lives? It might shape our actions. If we began every day with that prayer, that single question, that single intention that leads us through our day. Maybe if that was the only prayer that we ever prayed, that would be enough. You see, it's a question that helps us focus on what God expects of us, about what God expects us to do, but what God wants to do through us. You see, if our lives are grounded in gratitude, our response will be revealed in prayer in what will be revealed is that God doesn't ask us to do more than we can, but that God does expect us to do everything that we can.

Speaker 1: Mo, many of you know that we are working with a church consultant firm. They've, uh, helping us with our strategy, with our, our vision. And they've done a great deal of, uh, looking into all different aspects of the church, all different aspects of our ministry. But they've run the numbers. They've looked at the data, they've read all the reports, they've interviewed a number of different leaders, both on the staff and also a congregational leaders. They've done a tremendous amount of research. And finally, recently they gave us their reports. It's about 30 pages long, fascinating reading. And one of the things that they said, and I think perhaps maybe the most important thing that they said in this report is that we are dreaming too small. That we are dreaming too small. That with a congregation like ours, with this rich history, with this wealth of resources, with incredible people, passionate people like the people sitting next to you in the pews this morning, that our dreams are too small, that God is surely able to do more through us.

Speaker 1: If we would only dream a little bigger than if we would just pray a little bigger. You see? I think that when we stop and reflect on everything that God has done in our lives, all that God has done in this community, through this congregation, when we remind ourselves just how great and loving and generous God is, that with that collective memory that we would be bold enough to dream bigger, to pray bigger and to go on and do even greater things in his letter to the church and emphasis. Paul says that God whose power is now at work through us, that God can do immeasurably more than we ask more than we can even imagine that God's power in love are at work in us and that through that power and through that love that we can do more than we could ever ask more than we can ever imagine. In other words, Paul is reminding us in the same way that our consultants are reminding us that we need to dream bigger. We need to pray bigger is a church. I would simply ask you, how big are your prayers? How much do you ask God for? How much can you imagine God working in and through your life? Because Paul says that God is able to do immeasurably more than we can ask more even than we can imagine.

Speaker 1: And so when we pray, God, what do you want to do through me? Give thanks and pray big. Now I want to be careful here to make sure we're all on the same page, that we're dreaming the same dreams there. We're hoping for the same things. Now, I read recently that in Korea church attendance is exploding. In fact, the largest church, the longest largest congregation in Korea has over 700,000 members. Where do they park? I don't know where they parked, but 700,000 members and then in the last 40 years, Korea has moved from 1.4 million Christians to 20 million Christians in the last 40 years. Now we need to be careful here because there's the sociologist who has made some folks not too happy because he is identified that most of the growth in Korea come from churches. That, and I quote here, promised material rewards from God to those who pray sincerely.

Speaker 1: It's what here in the United States we refer to as the prosperity gospel. And folks. It's not just alive in Korea. It's alive right here in Fort worth and in Houston and all over our nation, all over our world. People safe. You just pray the right things that God will bless you and make you rich. That's not what we're talking about here. That's not what the gospel says. We aren't talking about praying to get the things that we want, thinking that we want or even need. Really what we're trying to do is to get God to make sure that that God is giving us what God wants. We aren't praying in order to get the things that we want, but we are praying to make sure that God is getting what God wants. There was a woman in my last congregation in Northern California. Her name was Anne and she's been a member of that congregation for a long time. I think many of you know that I, that was my home church that I served there and she was one of my youth when I was a youth. She's very patient woman. She's, I've put her through a lot.

Speaker 1: Number of years ago though, she developed a degenerative eye condition and she started to go blind and every day and would pray that she would be able to see,

Speaker 2: but every day [inaudible]

Speaker 1: her site would get worse and over time she came to see that God was leading her in a different direction, that her prayers were headed in a different direction. She said, I started to complain and any time I would complain there was just silence. Eventually she saw that God was leading her in a different direction. I asked for eyesight, she said, and I complained about the unfairness and the injustice of the whole thing, but what I needed,

Speaker 2: what I needed

Speaker 1: was to be released from my fears and that is what I was given when I wasn't even looking. That while I was finally listening, God came and released me from my fears and is now an amazing woman. She's always been an amazing woman. Now she's clinically, legally blind, but she went back to school and got a degree and is now a counselor who deals specifically with people as they deal with their own degenerative diseases. It's in the same way that my friend Carl says that prayer is more about advancing than retreating. Then it comes in our living, in our engaging in the lives of other people. That prayer is entering into the pain or the joy of another person. It's what we do when we

live passionately and wondrously when we invite other people to live the same way and so when that way prayer can never be separated from acting. We pray and then we act, we pray and then we move. We pray and then we do something about what we're praying about. John Shelby Spong and Episcopal Bishop says this, prayer is the process of being open to all that life can be and then acting to bring that fullness to pass. He said prayer is the recognition that holiness is found at the center of life and that it involves a deliberate decision to seek to live into that holiness and enter into it

Speaker 2: and then giving it away [inaudible]

Speaker 1: to enter into the holiness and then giving that away. God, what do you want to do through me based on your blessings, based on your goodness. In my life. Where do you want me to be in my giving may this prayer that we pray every day be revealed or everyone who asks, receives everyone who searches, finds for everyone who knocks the door shall be opened.