

Are you Persistent?

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Preacher: Jonathan de Groot

[0 : 00] Well, I don't know if you have heard about the Quiet Revival Report by the Bible Society.! It has been a widely reported document, not just in the Christian media, it's a Christian piece of research, but also in the mainstream media.

And the reason it's been reported on the Quiet Revival in mainstream media is probably because of the unexpected findings of this report. The recent research has come from two really large government surveys, YouGov surveys, suggesting that the UK is experiencing what the report calls a Quiet Revival.

And here are some of the standout statistics. They state that church attendance has risen by 56% over the past six years. That's from 8% to 12% of the population or 3.7 million to 5.8 million.

This is in England and Wales, but I suggest the research probably applies to Scotland as well. And in this research, the polls suggest that it's Gen Zed.

So that would be people between the ages of 18 and 24. It's Gen Zed who are leading the charge in church attendance where they've been going. And 4% used to go six years ago.

[1 : 24] Now, apparently 16% of 18 to 24 year olds have been interested in church and in going to church. And interestingly, the largest increase is amongst the young men in their 18 to 24s.

And in this group of young men, predominantly, but 18 to 24 year olds, Gen Zed, they're interested in reading the Bible and learning more about it.

And they're more likely to pray now than they were before and also more than older generations.

Gen Zed say that they're more spiritual with 35% of 18 to 24 olds saying that there's definitely a God, definitely gods, definitely some higher power out there, even if they're not sure who or what that higher power is.

And so the report is saying there is this resurgence. They're calling a quiet revival of interest in spirituality, predominantly Christianity in the UK.

And it's young people who are most curious in finding out more about God. Now, that's all research and statistics. And we might perhaps be skeptical, but I think it's actually something that I've discovered in my own engagement with people of this age.

[2 : 44] The most 18 to 24 year old people that are coming to contact with are those young men that Partick Thistle Football Club where I'm a chaplain. And in seven years of being a chaplain, I've noticed that this year, more than any other year, there's far more interest in the Bible, far more interest in sitting down and opening the Bible and studying it, far more of a desire to pray within that age group and just real interest in Christianity, wanting to find out about God, who he is.

And if he's there, then how do we relate to him? And hopefully you've had the same experience as well with people in that age category. Well, the big question about all of this is, well, for these young people, if there is a God, then how do we relate to him?

If there is a God, how can we find out about him and how can we communicate with him or engage with him? And that is essentially the issue that Jesus tackles here in these verses, Matthew 7, verse 7 to 12, because Jesus calls God your father in heaven.

In other words, he's saying to us, we can call God father. And Jesus is saying the way that you relate to God is through prayer.

It's through talking to him. It's through communicating with him. And he teaches us how this relationship with God operates as we are persistent in prayer. Because if you're in a relationship with anyone, how does that relationship grow and flourish?

[4 : 17] It happens when you speak with the other person. And so obviously, when it comes to God, we nurture that relationship through prayer. That's what Jesus is teaching here.

And after he tells us how we relate to God, which would be on a vertical level, he tells us then how we should relate to each other on a horizontal level. And that is through our proactive deeds. And so we're just going to look at two points this afternoon. The first is how to relate to God. Verse 7 to 12, we relate to God through persistent prayer. And then secondly, how to relate to others. In verse 12, we relate to others through proactive deeds. So first point, how to relate to God. And it's through prayer. Now, it's obvious the focus of Jesus' words in this passage are on prayer. Now, Jesus has already taught about prayer in the Sermon on the Mount. He's given us the Lord's Prayer. It's a prayer that we prayed earlier. And in the Lord's Prayer, he's teaching us the priorities of prayer.

[5 : 19] He's giving us a pattern to pray. So it helps us in our prayers. And then now, as he speaks about prayer again, he's talking about persistence in prayer, telling us to keep on praying.

Because that is how our relationship with God grows. And so in each case, the Lord's Prayer, and then here, asking, seeking, knocking.

Jesus is giving us a simple way to pray. Jesus is not complicating prayer for us. So look again at verse 7 to 9. 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. The one who seeks, finds. And to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

And it's just a refreshing simplicity about what Jesus says here about prayer. Ask, seek, knock. Praying to God doesn't require any kind of ritual or rigmarole.

[6 : 21] Because it's about a relationship with him. And in any relationship, you can confidently go to the person and speak to them. And Jesus is saying that's what you can do with God because he has become your father.

So we can talk to God in a simple, clear, honest, and direct way. That's how we relate to him. Simple asking, simple seeking, simple knocking.

It's not rocket science, as they say. So you don't need theological education to learn about prayer. You don't need to have been a Christian for 50 years to know how to pray.

You can just have walked into church today and walk away communicating with the God who made you. That's how simple prayer is. We can approach God about anything, anytime.

Now, there's something to notice about the commands, ask, seek, and knock, when Jesus gives them to us. Because they all come in the present tense. Which means that they indicate a continuous action.

[7 : 24] So Jesus wants us to keep on asking, to keep on seeking, to keep on knocking. There's even a sense of urgency, it seems, from asking, to seeking, to knocking.

An increase in intensity. So asking would be speech. Seeking would be movement. And then action would be, sorry, knocking would be action.

So Jesus wants us to be urgent in our prayers. He wants us to be persistent in our prayers.

Because five times here, he tells us to ask. And so it's indicating, from Jesus' words, the sheer repetition, along with the emphasis on continually asking.

And so, Jesus wants us to be in good, ongoing relations with our Father, with God. And that happens through prayer.

And so Jesus is encouraging us to ask God with a humble confidence for what we need. Not to shy away from God. Not to think that we can never approach God.

[8 : 32] Not to fear God as if he's not interested in us. But to know that God loves us. And he loves hearing from us in prayer. And he wants to answer us.

And so what Jesus does here is assure us of God's responsiveness to us. And that's why the emphasis here is all on God's abundant goodness, as opposed to the abundance of our words when we pray.

Because Jesus is promising that asking receives, seeking finds, and knocking gets an opening. And in case we miss what Jesus is saying, he repeats that very thing.

So, just read verse 8 again. For everyone who asks receives. The one who seeks finds. And to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. Why does Jesus repeat this promise virtually word for word?

Well, obviously he repeats it because we need to hear it. But not only do we need to hear it, we need to act on it. We need to do it. So, if Jesus tells us to pray, assuring us that God will answer, then we might be wondering, well, what should we ask?

[9 : 43] Because Jesus doesn't specifically tell us right here. But he's not promising some kind of blank check from God, where whatever we ask for, we'll get.

So, the question is, well, what should we be asking for? Well, I think the rest of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount gives us the best clue. Because it's no accident that Jesus tells us to ask, seek, and knock near the end of his sermon.

Which would suggest to us that Jesus wants us to ask God for everything his sermon tells us to be and to do. Which, if you've been tracking with us through the Sermon on the Mount, it's all connected with our spiritual lives, isn't it?

It's not about our material well-being. So, the asking has a spiritual focus to it. Jesus calls us to live out the values of the kingdom of heaven in this world, which means we have got to cultivate these kingdom values in our lives.

There are virtues that Jesus presents to us here that we need. And so, we will only have them if we ask for them. And you don't need to catch much of Jesus' Sermon here to realize just how far short we fall of what Jesus demands and commands of us.

[11 : 05] For example, the Beatitudes at the beginning of the sermon in Matthew chapter 5 say we are blessed if we are poor in spirit, if we're pure in heart, if we hunger and thirst after righteousness.

And so, we need to ask God for poverty of spirit, for purity in heart, and we need to hunger and thirst after righteousness. Jesus says in this sermon, he wants us to be reconciled to other people. He wants us to avoid lustful looking. He wants us to speak the truth. He wants us to love our enemies. He wants us to give generously. And so, we need to ask God for help to reconcile relationships that aren't right, to battle against lust and the things we look at, to speak the truth, to love our enemies, to give generously.

Jesus also tells us, do not worry. Do not be judgmental. Do not be a hypocrite. Be discerning. And so, we need to ask God for help in all of these areas.

Because we can't be what Jesus calls us to be without God's help. It's impossible. And so, if you're struggling with what Jesus tells us to do in the Sermon on the Mount or struggling in any area in your life, the question is, well, have you paid attention to what Jesus tells us to do?

[12 : 25] And so, the question is, well, have you prayed about it? Have you asked God to help you in that area? Because there won't be much change or there won't be much growth if we're not serious about asking for God's help.

And so, could it be that you're not seeing much change or much growth or much recovery in that particular area of your life simply because you're not praying about it?

You're not asking, you're not seeking, and you're not knocking. There's plenty asking, seeking, and knocking that needs to be done if we want to see the virtues of the Sermon on the Mount multiply in our lives.

Because we can't do it in our own strength. And yet, when we come to God, acknowledging our need, acknowledging that he is our Father, and asking him to transform us by the power of his Holy Spirit.

If that's our prayer, that is the kind of prayer that God loves to answer and loves to hear from his children. And so, persisting in prayer is an indication, not just that we have a good relationship with God, but it's an indication to God that we are serious about that relationship and we want it to grow.

[13 : 46] And so, Jesus assures us here that this continuous and persistent prayer results in a guaranteed outcome from our Father in heaven. And so, let's read on in verse 9, 10, and 11.

Jesus says, Now, Jesus is saying here, because God is our Father in heaven, he delights to give good gifts to his children.

They're there for the asking, which suggests that if we don't receive these good gifts, the fault is not with God, who is good, but the fault is with us in our failure to ask for them.

And so, Jesus here is basically illustrating how amazingly good God is to his children. And he does that by using the most precious and intimate of relationships, which is that between a parent and a child.

A father would never, ever give a stone to his son when he asks for bread and would never give him a snake when he asks for fish. If he's a bad father, he might, but any decent father would never put his child in harm's way.

[15 : 13] And so, when Jesus says, though you are evil, you know how to give good gifts to your children. In saying, you are evil, Jesus is talking about the reality of our fallen, sinful human nature.

Because we know we're not what we should be. We know we're not what we could be. We know we're not the best husband we could be, or wife we could be, or parent we could be, or son or daughter that we could be.

We know we fail in so many areas because, well, we're fallen people. We're sinful. We're evil. And Jesus says, despite this, despite that being what you are, you still know as a parent how to give good gifts to your children.

And so, if that is the case, then how much more does your heavenly father know how to give good gifts to you if you are one of his children? Because he knows what is best for us.

And that's why Jesus commands, ask and you will be given. And it doesn't mean we won't, we'll always get what we ask for. But it means we need to keep speaking to God.

[16:24] Because if God always gave us what we asked for, that wouldn't actually be good for us. And that would make God into some kind of genie. You know, like the story of Aladdin.

You know the story where Aladdin is this guy and there's this magic lamp. And the magic lamp's got this powerful genie. And if anybody gets the lamp and they rub the lamp, then this powerful genie appears and promises that he will grant whoever has rubbed the lamp whatever they wish for.

But God's not like the genie who instantly grants our wish, whatever it is, when we pray. Because if he did, he wouldn't be very wise, he wouldn't be very loving, he wouldn't be very good.

The same way if you're a parent and your kid asks for sweets again and again and again and you just give them, you just dish them out continually. It's not good parenting. So Jesus isn't suggesting that we persist in prayer so that we eventually wear God down and he gives us what we ask for.

In fact, the story of Aladdin, I think, perfectly illustrates how what we wish for isn't always what is best for us, is it? Because the reality is we don't actually know what is best for us, which means we don't always pray for what is best.

[17:46] We're not wise enough or discerning enough to know. In which case, it's actually a good thing that we don't always get what we want or what we ask for.

And so Jesus here is surely promising that God will answer our prayers according to what he knows is best for us. And so sometimes that will be receiving what we ask for.

But sometimes we won't receive what we ask for. I mean, just imagine if every prayer that you have ever prayed in your entire life was answered.

Think of all the wrong things that you asked for, all the stupid things that you asked for, all the outcomes that you wanted to see, because in the moment you thought that was the best.

But it's great to be able to look back and thank God that he did not answer every prayer the time we prayed it. Because in our naivety, we just didn't know what was best for us.

[18:52] We don't always understand what our ultimate good is. But thankfully, because God is a father, then he does. He has infinite knowledge and he's got infinite wisdom.

He is infinitely good and he is infinitely loving. And so he'll give us what is best, even if we can't see why at the time he's not giving us what we think we need.

If we put it in human terms, just like Jesus encourages us to do here, then human parents are just far better at knowing what is best for their young children than the young children are.

Children can't always grasp why mum or dad refused them things. And sometimes it's possible to explain to the child why, but usually the child just doesn't have the capacity to take in why.

They don't have the understanding of the situation. They can't read people the way that adults can read people. They can't see the wisdom behind a certain decision the way that their parents can.

[19:59] And so what might seem to be unloving or unkind to a small child is actually the best thing for them. And so what Jesus is saying here is that if there is this gap between a human small child and their parent, then how much more is there a gap between a human being and God in terms of knowing what is best?

There's obviously a far greater gap. And so though we may not always understand why, Jesus is pointing us to a loving heavenly father who does know what is best for us.

And so we can be confident that our praying will result in our father working out all things ultimately for our good. And so we need to trust him for it.

And that's our first point, how to relate to God through persistent prayer. Don't worry, our second point is not as long as the first point. So if you're panicking, thinking that was a long first point, you're right.

So secondly, let's think of how to relate to others. And we relate to other people through proactive deeds. That's what verse 12 is all about, because being in good relationship with God on the vertical level will always be reflected in how we relate to other people.

[21 : 18] So verse 12 says, So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the law and the prophets. Now, this is one of the most famous statements of Jesus.

It's often called the golden rule. And apparently, other ancient teachers had very similar statements. And also some modern teachers and philosophers have similar statements too.

So you'll find parallels to what Jesus says here in verse 12, in the teachings of Confucius, in Epictetus, in Stoicism, in Buddhism, even in the philosopher Immanuel Kant.

But what's interesting is they all state this kind of principle in a negative form, along the lines of, Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you.

But notice what Jesus says. He states it in a positive way, by saying, Do to others what you would have them do to you. And although they sound very similar, there is a world of difference between them.

[22 : 24] Because obeying, Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you, is actually really very easy. For example, if you don't want others to steal from you, don't steal from other people.

If you don't want others to shout at you, don't shout at other people. If you don't want to be punched in the face, don't punch somebody else in the face.

It's not hard, right? It's easy. And it's focused on looking after yourself. And it's also focused on what you don't do. So it's easy not to do something.

So that makes this principle, this point, far less demanding. Whereas Jesus' words here, the principle he expounds is far more demanding when he says, So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you.

Because Jesus' words here are not about looking after yourself. They're about looking out and looking after others. And they're not about what you don't do. What Jesus says is about what you do do.

[23 : 32] Jesus' words tell us to be proactive in our deeds towards other people. Which means his words are basically limitless in their scope. There's no limit to how much we should do or how far we should go for other people.

And so we can never say of verse 12, Well, I've done everything that Jesus asks of me here. Because his words have this all-embracing application.

Jesus wants us to relate to others in this positive and proactive way to express our love in action through good deeds towards other people.

And so he's saying this should be the default mode of your heart. This should be your life. Your spiritual life should be this.

Why? Because he says it's a summary. It sums up the law and the prophets. And that's why he's been called the golden rule. Because it's a principle that doesn't just run through the teaching of Jesus here in the Sermon on the Mount, but it runs through the whole of the Old Testament scriptures described as the law and the prophets.

[24 : 44] And it's about how we relate to others. So it sums up Jesus' ethics, if you like, in his sermon here. But it also aims to sum up the wisdom of the word of God.

So when you read the Old Testament, and it looks like there's loads of rules and regulations, they all illustrate the great principle that Jesus teaches here. In effect, it's the practical application of love your neighbor as yourself, which is another summary of the law and prophets that Jesus mentions elsewhere.

Because the law and the prophets, they're not a bunch of complicated, detached, impersonal, negative rules. The underlying purpose of them all is that we would treat other people in a loving way.

That's a good summary of them. And that's what Jesus says. He sums all of this up for us simply to show us the sheer simplicity of how we, of how you and I, should relate to other people.

It's not rocket science. Again, it's simple. And of course, it doesn't mean it won't be demanding in how we relate to other people. And it doesn't mean it won't be challenging. Of course, it's going to be challenging if we are to do to others what we would have them do to us.

[26 : 06] But we don't need to be confused about what Jesus is commanding here. Just imagine the difference in our world if we took Jesus at his word and obeyed him.

If we did to others what we wanted them to do to us. Imagine the difference in your family at home. Imagine the difference in our church. Imagine the difference in your workplace. Imagine the difference in society. If everybody did to others what they would want done to them. But you might be asking, well, okay, in what areas of life should I do to others what I'd want them to do to me?

Well, what does Jesus say? He says, so in everything. So in everything. Everything means everything. And I checked the Greek word out to see the original meaning.

And guess what? It means everything. And it could not be actually a more all-encompassing or comprehensive word. Because the original can mean whatever, all, every, whole, always, entire.

[27 : 16] So you get the picture, don't you? Nothing is excluded from the application of Jesus' rule here. There's no squirming out of what you should do for others.

So it's not just the things that you feel like doing or the glamorous things you enjoy doing or the visible things that you get credit for doing. It's everything.

Whether you feel like it or not, enjoy it or not, or get kudos for it or not. And this kind of life lived towards other people is fleshed out in so many practical ways in Jesus' sermon here.

Because, well, it's one thing to know in theory how we should treat other people. But it's another thing to do it in practice, isn't it?

To do it positively. So, yeah, don't go out killing people. That's good. But the opposite would be, well, go out and love people and serve people and help people.

[28 : 19] It's far more challenging to love by deeds and in action than it is in theory, isn't it? And yet, that's the kingdom way of life that Jesus calls us to.

And it's a way of practical, self-sacrificing love. Now, it's hardly surprising that it is a way of practical, self-sacrificing love when you listen to the lips of the one who says it.

Because this is what Jesus did himself. He lived in this way. Throughout his life, he lived in this way, but primarily in his death on the cross.

Out of proactive, practical, self-sacrificing love, Jesus did for us what we could never do for ourselves.

And that is to pay the price for our sin against the Holy God. And Jesus wasn't looking for us to do anything for him in advance before he did something for us.

[29 : 25] Why? Because the Bible tells us that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. And so, at great cost to himself, Jesus entered into this world and was crucified on a cross to bring you and me into a relationship with God.

Which means that we can now call God Father and we can ask him for anything in prayer. Jesus willingly came to make this a reality in our lives.

By living a life that we could never live and dying the death we deserve to die, Jesus fulfilled the law and the prophets for us. He perfectly obeyed the law on our behalf.

And then, he took our punishment for our failure to obey it. So this proactive, personal, self-sacrificing love is what saves people like me and you.

And it transforms our hearts and it changes our lives forever. And so it's only as we experience the love of God for us in Jesus Christ in our hearts that we're able to go and relate to others as we should.

[30 : 49] Because what Jesus has done for us will move us out in love towards others. to do good to them. We love because he first loved us.

Let's pray together. Thank you, our loving God, for sending Jesus into this world for us. We thank you that he is the supreme example of proactive, personal, self-sacrificing love.

Love that was displayed at the cross where he died. We thank you that through his death while we were still sinners, we are welcomed back to you and can enjoy your relationship with you because Jesus forgives all of our sin.

He wipes out all of our past, all of our rebellion so that we can know you as our father and be in your presence as your loved, adopted children.

We thank you for that. And so please help us not to stay away from you, the God who made us, but help us to know the intimate access that we can have through Jesus. And so because of that, to continually go to you in prayer, crying out to you for what we need and trusting that you are a wise

and good and loving father who will never put us in harm's way and who will give us what we ask.
[32 : 15] We thank you in Jesus' name. Amen.