

Session 1

‘Ask, and it will be given to you’

Gathering

Let's Get Acquainted

Make sure all feel welcome and are comfortable as the study begins. Encourage each in turn to respond to the following discussion starters. You might start with your own sharing.

1. Recall a time when you asked for something and did not receive it. Allow your memory to sail. Think about a humorous or sad memory. Share your name and briefly describe your memory of an unanswered request.
2. In a few sentences, share a story of a time when you were unable to meet someone else's request of you. How did that feel for you?

Let's Pray

Pray, or ask a volunteer to pray the following prayer aloud or speak another prayer of your choosing inviting petitions from participants.

Gracious and loving God, your Word teaches us how much you desire to give wonderful gifts to us, your children. We pause now to thank you for the many gifts you have given to us in our life. (Pause for 30 seconds or so) We are also mindful of times where it felt as if you did not hear our request, as it seemed to go unanswered. Like the 12 disciples in the Gospels, we say, "Lord, teach us to pray." In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

Growing

Read, or ask a volunteer to read the following aloud. You might read this material ahead of time and simply share it with the group.

"I was tired from several long days of teaching on the road. As I slid into my seat on the airplane, I felt waves of exhaustion wash over me. I yearned for peace and quiet - no more listening to others and no more talking, just quiet. As we sat and waited for the last passengers to board, I noticed that the only seat left was the middle seat next me. The air conditioning on the plane was not working and it was extremely hot sitting there. I prayed, 'God, please let this seat remain empty!' Just as they were closing the doors, in he bounced like Tigger, full of energy. 'God, why didn't you answer me?' I grumbled my prayer! No matter how I tried to ignore him, he kept trying to initiate conversation with me. Finally, I gave up all hope of sleeping and listened to this young twenty-something. By the time we deplaned, I knew why God had not honored my prayer. This 90-minute plane ride had enabled me to witness boldly to my faith in Jesus and to encourage this man to reconcile with his dying

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Advance preparation

To facilitate a successful small group experience, attend to the following needs in advance of the first session:

- Order a copy of this study, *Pray: Living Faith in Daily Life*, for each participant. (ISBN:6-0001-6440-8, \$1.25 each, plus shipping and handling.)
- Provide a small notebook for the personal reflection and journal exercises. Remember extra pencils, pens and Bibles.
- The facilitator should review this study in advance of the group's gathering to determine which resources to have on hand for each session.
- Plan for refreshments.

father to whom he was returning home to visit for the first time in three years.”

We do not always see the positive results from a prayer that is answered in a strikingly different way, as in this story. Sometimes we are left holding the frustrations and questions when prayer appears to be unanswered. Part of the growing edge in prayer is being ready to step back from the situation and see different answers to our prayer. We see our situation through a “foggy mirror” (1 Corinthians 13:12) but God sees the whole picture with clarity. Whose perspective would you rather trust with the decision on how to answer a prayer?

As a group, discuss this question and any thoughts or personal stories triggered by the airplane story.

BIBLE FOCUS: *Matthew 7:7-8*

Jesus said, “Ask, and it will be given you. . . For everyone who asks receives. . .”

Read, or ask a volunteer to read, the Scripture text and the following aloud. You might read this material ahead of time and simply share it with the group. Discuss questions and reactions as they arise.

Conversation around this and similar verses about asking and receiving often triggers memories and feelings. Raise your hand if you have prayed and received an answer to that prayer. Also, raise your hand if you have prayed and felt as if that prayer is still unanswered. If we are honest, most of us will find that we raised our hands to both questions.

The words of Jesus we have just read have caused much misunderstanding about prayer. Sometimes they are misused as a formula that seems to tell us that we can get what we want through prayer (like a letter to Santa Claus). When a me-centered, attitude draws us away from a loving relationship with God, we have distorted prayer into something it was not meant to be. Often we try to manipulate God to give us our hearts’ desire. Prayer is first of all a two-way communication between God and “me.” Part of that communication includes the use of words. Other

parts of it may include images, visions, dreams and other forms of revelation. At its deepest point, this communication may also take the shape of meditation or contemplation—wordless and image-less worship, communion with God.

Explore the meaning of this verse and other verses on prayer:

(asking and receiving: Luke 11)

(if two agree: Matthew 18:1)

(ask with faith: Matthew 21:22 and Mark 11:24)

The Gospel of John adds the understanding that our asking and receiving has to do with our relationship with God. If we abide or live by faith in Jesus and his Word lives in us, we will be living out his will as we live in this loving relationship (John 14:13-15; 15:7, 16; 16:23-24). When we consider that the encouragement to ask flows out of our loving relationship with God, it changes what we desire and ask to receive.

An example to illustrate this point is two close friends whose relationship is strong and healthy. Because of the friendship, both of those involved will tend to think about what is best for **us** rather than **me**. As a result, decisions and experiences flow out of the loving nature of the relationship. Conversations are seasoned by love, respect, and the desire to know and understand each other better. This is the nature of prayer as well. It is loving communication that is eager to receive God’s answers rather than push for our own. Meditation on God is like a woman who daydreams about her fiancé while they are apart.

Discuss the following questions. Ask participants to enter reflections and thoughts in their journals and share responses if they are willing to do so.

1. Read Matthew 7:9-10. “Earthly parents know how to give good gifts to their children. They do not give a stone instead of a loaf or a serpent instead of a fish.” These terms may have been chosen in part because of the superficial resemblance between some flat round stones and ordinary Palestinian loaves, between some serpents and some fish.” What is the best gift that you have ever received from anyone? What is the best thing that God has ever given you?

2. As you further reflect on gift giving, why do you give gifts to those you care about? What do you consider in selecting a gift? How does it feel to watch that person open that gift?
3. Imagine that you are God. What might be some factors that enter into your decision making as you consider various prayer requests?

JOURNAL TIME

Journal work may be started during class time and completed later at home. It may be helpful to share some of your journal reflections.

Read John 15:1-17. Circle the 10 times that John uses the word “abide” in verses 1-11. Reflect in your journal on the word abide. What comes to mind? Write down your thoughts, sketch the picture, or write the poem or song that begins to unfold. Some of us may have an existing hymn, painting or devotional article that comes to mind. Find it, write the name of the hymn or devotional title and page down in your journal and add your own reflections on it as well. Other words from John 15 to journal on are: love, joy, bearing fruit, and finally, ask (v. 7, 16). What are the relationships that you see in this text between these relational words and the encouragement to ask?

Going

Final thoughts

Read the following aloud and discuss, as time permits.

You are invited in this study to seize this moment and wade into the life-giving waters of prayer. Admittedly, prayer develops spiritual intuition and faith within us that we may not ever have experienced. Meditating on Bible passages, deep reflection and journaling about God and life, as well as expressing our heart-felt concerns and requests to God, may all be new to you. That is all part of the gift and adventure of prayer. Pastoral guidance and the support and

encouragement of Christians journeying with us are as valuable as having a map and a compass on any other journey. Let the joy of this spiritual journey begin! Jump into the waters of prayer.

CLOSING PRAYER

If possible, light a candle and soften the lights in the room. Designate one person to briefly open and close the prayer time. Invite others to name in prayer a hindrance that holds them back from abiding in Jesus. Some may choose to pray a word of joy or thanksgiving for the gift of a relationship with God and each other in the small group. Ask someone to slowly and quietly read again John 15:1-17. Take time for silence and meditation before closing the prayer.

Encourage all to complete the Small Group Covenant. Suggest that participants read the covenant and sign it prayerfully. The covenant is meant to be a statement of intention, seeking God’s blessing.

Small Group Covenant:

1. I commit to being a part of this group for each of our meetings (barring emergencies).
2. I will pray each day for each small group member by name.
3. I will invest time each day to pray, reflect and journal on the “journal time” text.

Signed: _____

Date: _____