

Have you ever been riding in the car with somebody who is totally lost and getting more and more lost by the minute, but they absolutely refuse to stop and ask for directions? Some people would rather drive 500 miles out of their way than stop and ask for help, and it's not just men who do this. Some researchers took a survey of 100 men and 100 women presenting them with this scenario: Imagine that they are on vacation with their families and driving into a major city. They encounter major road construction, so they have to get off the highway and take a detour. Before long, they are hopelessly lost. They were given two choices—either drive for an hour and try to find their way back to the highway, or stop immediately and ask for help. Out of that group, only 10% of the men, and 40% of the women said that they would stop. Which means that the majority of both genders would prefer to drive around lost for an hour than actually admit to being lost. No wonder it took Moses 40 years to lead the Israelites to the Promised Land, imagine how quickly they could have arrived if he was willing to ask for directions!

There was a man who played bagpipes for various occasions, and agreed to play at the grave side funeral for a homeless man. The deceased had no family or friends, so the service was to be at a pauper's cemetery in the Kentucky back woods. The bagpipe player was not at all familiar with the backwoods, and he got hopelessly lost; and of course did not stop to ask directions. He arrived at the grave site an hour late, only to find that the funeral director had already left and the hearse was nowhere in sight. Only the diggers and crew were left... and they were eating lunch. He walked up and apologized for being so late, then went to the grave and started to play. The workers put down their lunches and began to gather around. He played his heart out for this man with no family and friends; in fact he played those bagpipes like they have never been played before for this homeless

man. Those workers were so moved, that they began to weep, and it was a sacred moment. When he finished, he packed up the bagpipes and headed to the car with a very full heart. As he opened the door to his car, he heard one of the workers say, "Holy Mother of God, I never seen anything like that before.... and I've been putting in septic tanks like this one for twenty-five years."

Well, today I want to talk about the importance of being able to ask for and receive help. We Americans are known for our rugged individualism, and self-sufficiency. Most of us do not like to be indebted to anyone for anything. I remember in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina 4 years ago, I saw a man interviewed on the news one evening. This was a very distinguished looking black man who was now facing homelessness and poverty. He cried as he spoke about how difficult it was for him to ask for assistance, to find himself in a situation where he needed others to help him. He said, "I have never taken this kind of help from anyone in my life. This is not easy."

I understand his sentiments. I am the same way, and the times when I have been really sick, or without a car, and needed to ask other people for help it has been very hard. And yet I have always learned that people are more willing to do things for us than we are to ask them. Most people are happy to help us.

Several years ago a movie came out called "Stanley and Iris." Starring Robert DeNiro and Jane Fonda, it told the true story of a very kind and capable man who had reached his mid-40s without being able to read or write. He compensated in hundreds of ways—paying for everything in cash, riding a bicycle so he would not have to take a driver's test, and so on. Nobody knew his terrible secret. His nearly life-long illiteracy boiled down to the simple fact that he was too proud to admit that he needed help. Finally, he swallows his pride and admits his illiteracy, and a whole new world opened up to him. He was ashamed of how much he had missed because of his pride.

Of course, you don't need to be illiterate to need help, or in the midst of a crisis or terrible predicament. It is not a sign of weakness, at all, but actually a sign of strength to be able to ask for and graciously receive help.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talks about how blessed are people who need help. Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth, blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted." Poverty of spirit, meekness, gentleness, humility, all are virtues of the spiritual life. It is important for us to realize our emptiness, weakness, brokenness. Jesus could have said: "Blessed are those who know they need help, and are not ashamed to ask for it, for their help will come from God."

Elsewhere Jesus says: "Seek and you shall find, ask and you shall receive, knock and the door shall be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened." Notice the active words used here—seek, knock, ask. Be an active participant in getting the help you need, don't just sit back and wait for it.

And, by the same token, be the sort of person who gives help gladly and freely. Be an encourager, an inspirer. Every Wednesday evening Jim Marshall and I teach a class based upon the Tim McGraw song "Live like You Were Dying." It is a great class, and last Wednesday the topic was "Speak Sweeter." We thought about the ways in which our tongues can be blessing or poison, and how much we needed to speak sweeter to everyone we meet. The story was shared of John Kevin Hines, one of only a handful of people who survived an attempted suicide jump off the Golden Gate Bridge. He told himself that if any one of the hundreds of people he rubbed shoulders with on the way to the bridge had noticed he was distraught, and spoke to him, he would not jump. That's all it would have taken, just one human being to acknowledge his existence. No one did. On his way down he asked God for a second chance, which is what he miraculously got. He asked God for help. Speak sweeter, even to total strangers—you never know the difference it can make.

Now I have always liked Nicodemus. He is a Biblical character who was a scholar and teacher of the law. Many people came to him for guidance and direction. He taught with passion and insight, he knew God, he loved God, and he

knew the law. And yet none of this was enough, he had a spiritual hunger that nothing seemed to satisfy. We do not know just how long Nicodemus went around pretending that everything was just fine. But finally, one night under the shroud of darkness, he sought out one that he knew could help. He quietly came to Jesus, so nobody would know, and asked: "Teacher, what must I do to gain eternal life?" It was a question that came from the bottom of his heart. And Jesus said, "You must be born again." From that time on, Nicodemus would never be the same. That meeting with Jesus changed his life forever. Nicodemus had to admit his spiritual poverty before he could become rich, he had to admit his emptiness before he could become full, and he had to admit he was weak before he could become strong.

Chuck Colson came to the same place in his life. Once one of the most powerful men in the US Government, as Special Counsel for President Nixon, he was utterly disgraced by Watergate. He was the first member of the Nixon administration to go to prison, and spent 7 months in Alabama's Maxwell Prison. There he had a complete conversion experience and decided to devote the rest of his life to helping other prisoners. His ministry now operates in hundreds of prisons all over the world. Colson wrote: "It all began when I stopped thinking I could handle everything by myself, and admitted that I needed help. I have been so close to those in the highest office in the world. I have been in palaces; I have traveled everywhere. By far, the greatest joy in my life has been found in prison, on a grimy concrete floor with a burly convict who, in a flood of tears gives his life to God." Blessed are those who can admit how much they need help.

Life has a way of humbling even the most arrogant individuals. And sooner or later, something will come along that will force all of us to our knees. Lots of things do it: raising kids, getting fired, getting caught, getting sick, and growing older. Human life is just full of experiences that humble us and vividly remind us that we cannot do everything on our own. Those words of Hemingway are timeless, "Life breaks everyone, and then some become strong at the broken places." Sorrow, illness, suffering, death, divorce, money problems, or just the day

to day struggles of living remind us of our vulnerability and fragility.

Now, I want to say today, as I have before, that to a very large degree, the whole reason this church exists is to help you. To help you be a better person, to be more kind, generous, and forgiving, to help you help others, and help you know and serve God. But also this church exists to help you with your life. To help you find a deep inner peace that nothing can ever take away. To help you raise your kids, have a stronger marriage, be a better friend, employee, citizen and neighbor. We want to help you, and if we cannot do it ourselves, we will refer you to someone who can. Please do not wait for a crisis or emergency to turn to God for help. So many times, people turn to God only after the bottom has dropped out of their world. Lean on God when things are going great so that God will be there for you when they are not.

There is one who is just waiting to offer you support strength, forgiveness, compassion and care. So make it a habit of praying, "Help me, dear God." It's that simple. You will be amazed and how much help you will get. "Blessed are those who know how much they need help and are not afraid to ask for it. Their help will come from God."

Let us pray: We all need your help, dear God more than we know. So help us to turn our lives over to you, to trust in you, to lean on you. Keep us humble, meek, and gentle. Give us the grace to seek, ask, knock, knowing that you will be there for us, and guiding our lives. Bless the broken hearted, the lost, the sick, the sad. Bless our church as we continue to try to help everyone in need. All of these things we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our strength, our help, our salvation. Amen.