

Ask, Seek, Knock, Do

Matthew 7:7-12

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

On the question of prayer, which is at the heart of Christian living, Jesus has already, in the Sermon on the Mount, warned of the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, the babbling repetition of the pagans, and given us a model of prayer in the Lord's Prayer. And he has done so in the context of a demanding summons to discipleship. So demanding, that, at points it seems preposterous.

Here, in our text from Matthew 7, it's as if the Lord is saying: Look, I know I've set and exacting, yea an impossible, standard before you. Indeed, you are to be perfect as your father in heaven is perfect. I know you do not have the resources, or the natural ability to be who I've summoned you to be. Yet, I do not intend to discourage you. So here I desire to remove your hesitancy to live this life, your unbelief and doubt. Here, I want to stimulate you, with these expansive and astounding promises, to eagerly ask and seek the things you lack, namely, the qualities, the virtues, the fruit of the Spirit, to which my sermon calls you.

So, it's crucial for us to see, that we must set this text in the context of the sermon as a whole, in the light of the Lord's Prayer in particular. If we do not do this – that is, if we just tear this text out as a little standalone piece of prayer advice, we will end up either with some bizarre name it and claim it theology, where we will have to keep coming up with reasons why are prayers are not answered. Maybe we didn't have enough faith, maybe we didn't pray hard enough, maybe it's a secret sin, maybe it was answered, and the answer is no, & so on. And even if one doesn't go down that path, one will still look at the text here, and its seemingly ridiculous guarantees, as something impossible to square with our experience of prayer.

So, it is seeking the kingdom first, it is praying shaped by the priorities of the Lord's Prayer, it is passionately desiring to live the life of the beatitudes, *These* realities need to frame our approach to this short passage on prayer. With that frame, then, we will make two points. Good gifts in vv. 7-11, and the Golden Rule in v. 12.

I. Good Gifts

First, then, good gifts. Matthew 7, verse 7: Ask and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. As has been often pointed out, these are continuous, present tense verbs. Keep asking, you will receive, keep seeking and you will find, keep knocking and it will be opened to you. And Jesus is absolute about the results as v.8 indicates: EVERYONE (not an elite group of pious people) EVERYONE who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door WILL BE opened.

Ask, seek, and knock are virtual synonyms. And what we are to be asking, seeking, and knocking for is the kingdom of God and his glory. What we are to be seeking is to be people who live out the beatitudes, who embody the ethic of the Sermon on the Mount, who are perfect as our heavenly father is perfect. And the WAY we are to be asking, seeking and knocking, is the way of the Lord's Prayer. And you can be sure that the one who does this, persistently, will receive what they ask for.

God WILL always vindicate His glory, He will hallow his name in the earth, He will bring forth his indestructible kingdom, He will see that his will is done, on earth as it is in heaven. He will always supply what you NEED – you can't always get what you want – but God will supply your daily bread. And he will always answer prayers for forgiveness and deliverance from evil. He will have a holy people, poor in spirit, meek, merciful, peacemakers, pure in heart, who shall see his face and have his name upon them.

Sometimes the answers here, will come – fully, at least – in the eschaton. But these are the things – the only things – that these promises are attached to. If you are asking and seeking and knocking about the content of the Lord's Prayer, about the virtues of the beatitudes, you will not be disappointed. And we desperately need prayer that is driven by the priorities of the Lord's Prayer: The Hallowing of God's name in the earth, the coming of His kingdom, the doing of His will, and THEN our needs and our salvation. We are not eager enough to ask for the right things – and it is to excite that eagerness in us, that Jesus makes these sweeping promises here.

In addition, Jesus commands – and these are commands (Ask, Seek, Knock) – he commands persistence. Just prior to issuing these same commands in Luke's gospel, Jesus tells the parable of the friend at midnight as an example of the need for endurance, persistence in prayer. So what we are being called to here is a confident, expectant boldness in continually praying for the kingdom. Calvin said: nothing is better adapted to excite us to prayer than the full conviction that we will be heard.

One of the greatest treatises on prayer ever written, is Calvin's chapter on the subject in Book III of the Institutes of the Christian Religion. I would commend it to you highly. He says there that all the treasures of God are laid up in Jesus Christ clothed in the gospel. But, he says, the thing that remains, is for us to DIG

OUT those treasures by arduous, persistent prayer. There is simply no appropriating of our riches in Christ, apart from this sacred labor. “Words,” Calvin says, “fail to express how important prayer is.” Prayer is the language of the poor in spirit, it is the logic of beggars. It is a declaration of deep dependence (creature), of need which seeks its fulness elsewhere.

If you want to see God do great things in and through Westminster Presbyterian Church then pray more, and pray prayers shaped by the Lord’s Prayer. Prayers which aspire to the blessed life of the beatitudes.

This brings us to a short parable Jesus tells to illustrate his point and encourage us further. v. 9: 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? The examples are intentionally absurd. Of course, no decent human parent would respond this way. If we human parents, who are evil (meaning fallen and selfish, mere shadows of God’s gracious fatherhood)... If we know how to give good gifts to our children HOW MUCH MORE will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him?

There is an important qualifier to the note of persistence here. Persistence is not called for because God is a grudging, ungenerous Father who needs to be “prevailed upon.” The Father who gave His Son, who is beneficently inclined to you, who has in X, fully turned His face to you – He is the one who, with the Son, wills to freely give us all good things. What will he not grant to us, Augustine says, having already granted the gift of making us sons? So, it is God’s goodness, not some sort of guilt or anxiety which nurtures our persistence. That is the force of the “how much more” here. If human parents, in their brokenness, give good gifts to their children, how much more our Father the good source of all goodness.

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. So prayer changes us, it does not change God’s disposition toward us. Jacob may be said to prevail with God, but it was Jacob who walked away wounded. And persistence is not nagging. It means occasionally, seasonably, regularly, across long periods of time, reminding God of what He has promised. It’s a fine line, I know, but God doesn’t have a counter waiting for you to cross some threshold. He is your Father, and He will give you the things contained in the Lord’s Prayer, the virtues of the beatitudes, and the fruit of the Spirit.

And those things here are called good gifts. These good gifts are cast in a radiant light in the way Luke ends his version of this short parable (of our text). He says: how much more will your heavenly Father give (not good gifts), but the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!

It turns out that all the good things we ask of God can be reduced to this: the gift of the Spirit. Now that should change the way we look at prayer, and especially

the notion of persistent asking, seeking and knocking. All prayer is a seeking of God himself. And the chief gift of prayer is the gift of God the Spirit. He is, in the words of our closing hymn: that best of all donations God can give or we implore. Prayer then is always, and ultimately about communion with God in the Spirit. And with himself, God freely gives us all things. It is in the Spirit that we pray and dig out the treasure, the good gifts of the gospel, laid up in Christ.

II. Golden Rule

Our second point is the Golden Rule. In v. 12, apparently in response to our Father's generosity, Jesus starts with a therefore (often translated as "so"): So, whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets. The SO connects this command to the short passage on prayer just prior.

The logic seems to be as follows. Out of gratitude for the Father's goodness, out of the grace of the Holy Spirit received in response to our kingdom petitions, out of the inner freedom and security we have in the hands of this Father, we can now imitate Christ, and do to others what we would have them do to us.

Calling this the Golden rule can be traced to the Roman Emperor, Severus, in the early 3rd century. Though he was not a Christian, he was so impressed with this command, he had it engraved in gold on his chamber wall. The rule is not unique, it is found in the ancient world a good bit (Confucius, the Stoics, Homer, Herodotus, Seneca, the Rabbi's), often, not always, in negative form: What you don't want done to you, don't do to others.

While that is certainly true, and even implied by Jesus' words here, the positive form is far more demanding. The goats of Matthew 25, those who did not visit the imprisoned, or feed the hungry, would be acquitted under the negative form (they didn't do anything bad to anyone), but indicted under the positive form (they failed to positively love their neighbors). This rule summarizes, Jesus says, the Law and the Prophets. Which means it's not arbitrary or subjective. You can't decide that you're ok with people cursing you, and therefore curse them. It needs the Law and the Prophets, and the kingdom they announce, to inform it. And the rule is exquisitely simple. It summarizes all commands pertaining to our neighbors into one, always applicable rule.

This, then, is the summary of the beatitudes, of the righteousness that exceeds the scribes and the Pharisees, of the righteousness of the kingdom, of our attitude toward our enemies and those who hate us. This is the rule of the Kingdom of God. Yet, the rule, given our self-love, our propensity to judge, is exquisitely difficult. It calls for deep empathy, for imaginatively displacing ourselves, and for placing ourselves in the shoes of the other, and asking:

How would I like to be treated, what do the Law and the Prophets require of me, in this situation? Calvin says: where our own advantage is concerned, we can all do into detail, chapter and verse, on the extent of our rights. Everyone, he says, shows himself an exact scholar of equitable dealing, when it suits himself. In other words, we are all great at knowing how we like to be treated.

What is required here is applying that same sensitivity to the other person. Speaking of it, Spurgeon says: Oh, that all men acted on it, and then there would be no slavery, no war, no sweating, no striking, no lying, no robbing; but all would be justice and love! What a kingdom is this which has such a law!

This is The Christian Code. This is the condensation of all that is right and generous. We adore the King out of whose mouth and heart such a law could flow. This one rule is a proof of the divinity of our holy religion. The universal practice of it by all who call themselves Christians would carry conviction to Jew, Turk, and infidel, with greater speed and certainty than all the apologies and arguments which the wit or piety of men could produce. Lord, teach it to me! Write it on the fleshy tablets of my renewed heart! Write it out in full in my life!

Thus, what we are asking, seeking, and knocking for is, in large part, the power to be able to live by this rule. To never be mean, cruel, unkind, angry, impatient, insensitive, or harsh, but rather demonstrating the fruit of the Spirit in every encounter with every person. When we ask our Father for his good gifts, when we pray for the chief gift of the Spirit, we are asking for God to give us his own love, for the Spirit is the love of God poured out in our hearts, that we might love others as ourselves.

The heart of all prayer then is the closing words of our closing hymn: *come with unction, and with power, on our souls your graces shower; author of the new creation, make our hearts your habitation.*

Praise be to God, our heavenly Father, who will give all good gifts, in and through and with the Holy Spirit, to those who seek His kingdom above all things! Amen.

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