

Matthew 7:7-12

7:7-8 Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.

Consider God. He is perfectly good, infinitely powerful, and immeasurably wise; therefore, He can do whatever He pleases and His decisions are always done with the greatest wisdom. He is righteous, so He always does what is right. He has demonstrated He loves us in the deepest way possible through His Son's sacrificial death. He calls us His children. When we pause to consider all of this, then the extravagant invitation of God to ask Him for good things with the promise that He will give them is unimaginably wonderful.

Jesus is calling on all who pursue God to pray (also see Jer. 29:13). In order to be humble in spirit, pure, and compassionate as we should be, we must seek the help and power of God. Not to do so is sure defeat.

The three imperatives- ask, seek and knock should be translated- keep on asking, keep on seeking, and keep on knocking (see Lk. 11:5-13; 18:1-8; I Thess. 5:17). The verb tense emphasizes perseverance and constancy. Although all three expressions are probably intended to be synonymous, the repetition shows us how strong the invitation is. But some also see a progression in involvement with each expression. Even though we know that everything comes from God, we must not assume that we are not to be actively, aggressively, and perseveringly involved in its fulfillment. Jesus is not just offering a formula to get things, as if God were a genie in a bottle, He is having us develop deeper communion with God through active participation with Him in prayer. "These words imply, that those who are destitute of what is necessary, and yet do not resort to this remedy for their poverty, are justly punished for their slothfulness." (Calvin)

"Everyone" in verse 8 is a word that should not be passed over lightly. Jesus wants us to know that God's answers to prayer are not reserved for a few elite people, who due to their extraordinary lives have gained the favor of God. Rather, He "knows that we are timid and shy, that we feel unworthy and unfit to present our needs to God. . . . That is why Christ wants to lure us away from such timid thoughts, to remove our doubts, and to have us go ahead confidently and boldly" (Luther quoted by Stott, 184). Therefore, He emphasizes that EVERYONE who prays will be heard.

"Surely the point of this lavish array of promises is to say to us: Be encouraged to come. Pray to him. It is not in vain that you pray. God is not toying with you. He answers. He gives good things when you pray. Be encouraged. Pray often, pray regularly, pray confidently" (Piper)

7:9-11 Or what man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!

We are subjects of the kingdom and God is our king. We live in a monarchy; God is reigning. But that is not all that we are; we are also a family. Ephesians tells us that we are the household of God. Repeatedly, John calls believers, "children of God." Jesus had already taught us to pray "**Our** Father, who

is in heaven” and that we are to be perfect, as **our** heavenly Father is perfect (Matt. 5:48). Being part of His family, we are to view God as our Father. As John Scott has well said, "Christian counter culture is not an individual value system and lifestyle. It is a community affair. It involves relationships."

In these verses Jesus uses men who are self-centered (thus called evil) to demonstrate God's willingness to give. Even men, whose goodness cannot compare to the goodness of God, give good gifts to their children. No parent would give an inedible rock to a child who is hungry, nor would he give a snake to a child wanting a fish. Should anything less be expected from God by those who ask? God is our Father; He will never ever give what is bad for us (Ja. 1:16-17).

7:12 In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

Our Lord now gives one simple precept for the regulation of our conduct. It is not merely a summary statement, but covers all that is required by "the law and the prophets" (the OT). It would be a great mistake; however, to assume that this is all that is required by God to maintain a good relationship to Him.

The *negative* form of verse 12 is found in many religions; namely, "Do not do anything to anyone that you would not want him to do to you." The famous Hebrew rabbi Hillel of the first century BC said, "What is hateful to yourself, do not to someone else." Likewise, Confucius taught, "What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others." In the same vein the Stoics (Greek philosophers) said, "What you do not want to be done to you, do not do to anyone else" (MacArthur). Jesus, however, gives the *positive* form, and the difference between the two is profound. The negative form simply teaches us to refrain from certain kinds of behavior. For example, "If you don't like to be robbed, don't rob others", or, "If you don't like to be hated, don't hate others." But by using the *positive* form, Jesus teaches us to do acts of goodness toward each other. If you like to be loved, you should love others, or, if you like to be appreciated, you should appreciate others. If you like to be forgiven, you should forgive others. Jesus is not satisfied if His disciples simply refrain from evil. They must do positive good as well.

This is one of those verses that people tend to read between the lines. It should also be noticed that the motivation behind the action is not simply to receive the same action in return. Although it may be true that if we are kind to people they will be kind to us, the Christian's primary motive should be to please God and conform to His standards of conduct regardless of reciprocal action. "For this is the law and the prophets." Treating people the same way you want them to treat you is the whole sum of Scripture.

Though the Ten Commandments follow the pattern of being negative commands - "You shall *not* murder, you shall *not* commit adultery, you shall *not* steal, you shall *not* bear false witness against your neighbor, you shall *not* covet" – at the same time these commandments of restraint were not all that were taught in the OT. When the Jews asked Jesus what the greatest commandment was, Jesus replied "the first and great commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. And the second is like it: love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:37-39). Jesus did not quote from the 10 commandments for they could not sum up the entire law; they were just a part of it. Loving God and others incorporated everything. These two concepts (Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18) summed up the law's true intent.

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James 2:8 calls the command to love your neighbor as yourself the royal law; it is the law of the king, the precept that governs life in the kingdom.

Romans 13:8 says, "Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law." Verse 9 explains why. "For this, 'you shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet,' and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.'" Then in verse 10 Paul concludes "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law."

When you love your neighbor as yourself, you have fulfilled all the law. If you love your neighbor you won't kill him, steal from him, or mistreat him in any way. In addition, you will also do him positive good.

In other words, because God commands it, we should treat people kindly even if they treat us badly in return. We should love even if we receive no love in return. We should forgive even if others don't forgive us. Reciprocal action is not in view! The question is, "How do I like to be treated by others?" In that way I should treat others as well.

There is a second reason why we should treat others as we want to be treated. Verse 12 is the conclusion of what has preceded, as indicated by the word "therefore." However, it is a bit uncertain exactly what it is concluding. This could be the conclusion drawn from God being a good Father. Because He is good to us we should *therefore* be good to others. Or "therefore" could be related to verses 1-5 where we were told not to be judgmental. In this case Jesus would be saying, instead of judging others, treat them as you would want to be treated. But it is also possible that "therefore" is the conclusion we should draw from the promises of verses 7-11. God has promised us that we will never lack any good thing if we simply ask Him. If we seek, we will find. If we knock, it will be opened. Therefore, the reason we can risk giving to others and loving others as we would like to be loved is because we can be confident that we have an ultimate and eternal resource to replenish our own needs. We can do to others without the fear of having nothing left because our heavenly Father promises to supply every need we will ever have. In other words, whatever I may give away of myself and whatever good things I may do to others, I know God will replenish my own supply. And so I act, not only to conform my life to the law and the prophets, but because giving sacrificially to others is walking by faith in the promise that God will meet my needs.

Jesus' words aren't intended to cover the subject of prayer comprehensively. He is stressing one simple and important principle – ask of God for He loves you and longs to bless your life with abundance. However, there are also other principles tied to prayer that need to be remembered.

The context itself implies that we will not necessarily get exactly what we ask for. God gives good gifts because He is all wise, all good, all loving and powerful. We are not. It is very possible that we may think that we are asking for bread when in reality we are requesting a rock. A loving Father wouldn't give such a gift to his son no matter how badly he wanted it. We simply don't know enough to determine how every request will turn out and what the next events in our lives will be, let alone how our requests would affect history. God takes all of this into consideration.

Secondly, James 4:3 says, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures." At times we want things that aren't good for us out of ignorance (#1 above); at times we want things due to our sinful desires. Like a drug addict, we long for that which further enslaves us. "Christ therefore enjoins us to submit our desires to the will of God, that he may give us nothing more than he knows to be advantageous. We must not think that he takes no notice of us, when he does not answer our wishes: for he has a right to distinguish what we actually need. All our affections being blind, the rule of prayer must be sought from the word of God: for we are not competent judges of so weighty a matter. He who desires to approach God with the conviction that he will be heard, must learn to restrain his heart from asking anything that is not agreeable to his will." (Calvin)

I John 5:14 and 15 say, "In whatever we ask, we know we receive of Him if we ask according to His will." A true child of God desires above all the will of his Father. Jesus Himself prayed "Not My will, but Yours be done" (Matt 26:39, 42). Our desire should be to glorify Christ (Ro. 8:28) and if our prayers are not leading to that end, we should not want them answered in the way we ask.

In 1 Peter 3:7 Peter instructs us to live godly lives so that "our prayers will not be hindered." Sin can prevent God from answering what we ask.

Lastly, when we ask, we are to ask in faith. James 1:5-8 tells us that we "must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways." Although God can act whether we have faith or not (He is not hindered by unbelief), His sovereign will, in some mysterious way, is often linked to faith.

John Stott in his book "The Message of the Sermon on the Mount" (IVP) makes some helpful observations (pp. 186-189). He states that some people in hearing Jesus' simple teaching of "ask, seek, knock" raise objections that need to be considered. These are summarized below.

1. Jesus' comments can be seen as a misrepresentation of God. God knows everything before we ask. He cares for us whether we ask or not, as any good parent would. Why then, should we suppose that we need to ask for His gifts at all?

To this Stott replies that the reason we ask has nothing to do with God's knowledge or that He has reluctance on His part to bless us. "The reason has to do with us not Him; the question is not whether He is ready to give but if we are ready to receive." In prayer we are not trying to prevail against God, we are trying to prevail over ourselves and submit to God.

God has a greater purpose in mind than just showering gifts upon people who neither want them nor are ready for them. Instead He waits until we recognize our need and respond to Him in humility. Prayer, therefore is not unseemly, it is part of God's predetermined means of having us consciously recognize our dependence upon Him in everything.

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2. A second objection people offer is that prayer is unnecessary. People get lots of things without praying. The farmer receives a crop, people buy homes, unbelievers are often better off than believers -- and all without a bit of prayer.

However, we need to distinguish between the general gifts of God given to all men in His goodness, and the gifts He gives to His children. Jesus is not simply talking about material gifts, but spiritual ones as well. He had told us to pray for our daily bread, but He had also told us to pray for forgiveness! One is a material gift; the other is a redemptive gift. We pray for daily bread, not because we think we will starve to death if we don't, but because we know it is from God, and because as His children it is right to acknowledge our dependence upon Him.

3. A third objection that people have is that prayer is unproductive. God gives to people who don't ask (#2 above), and He doesn't always give what we ask for anyway, so why bother praying?

Jesus' promises that God responds to prayer are conditional. God is not obligated to answer exactly as we ask. That would turn prayer into magic. If God gave me everything I prayed for, says Stott, I would never pray again for I would never have sufficient wisdom to pray with confidence. In effect, if God did everything we asked him to do we would become God. We would then have to bear the burden of infinite wisdom which we do not have. We should be grateful that He does not do all that we ask for, and happy that He has shut doors in our face.

The lessons we learn from prayer: (1) Prayer presupposes knowledge – since God only gives gifts according to His will, we must discover God's will. (2) Prayer requires faith. We must humble ourselves and believe God at His word, and trust the decisions that He makes. (3) Prayer presupposes desire. We may know God's will, and believe He is powerful enough to do it, but not have an interest in it. Prayer presupposes a desire to do God's will and want His will to be done above my own. Prayer is the chief means that God has ordained to grant our deepest desires.