

Ask, Seek, Knock

Motivation Toward Persistent Prayer

Scripture: Matthew 7:7-11

Sermon Series: *Matthew*

Topic: Prayer

Matthew 7:7-11 (ESV)

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⁷ "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. ⁹ Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? ¹¹ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

Introduction

Ask, seek, and knock. These are quite famous words spoken by Jesus and they are intended to motivate his disciples, then and now, toward persistent prayer.

This paragraph has historically been one subjected to much abuse, misquoting, and misunderstanding. It is often tossed about without any thought given to its context, as though these words of Jesus can be used by anyone and everyone who has any kind of desire and wants to use God as a means to fill it. That is not what Jesus is teaching. We must know what Jesus is and is not saying here.

Therefore, we must consider its context. If we fail to carefully consider the context of this portion of Scripture, then we will conclude that Scripture is untrue and that God is nothing more than a divine vending machine whose only purpose is to serve us and our selfish desires.

This sermon is one delivered to and about the people who dwell in the kingdom of heaven (5:1-2). This is not a sermon to and about all people of the world. This sermon is



a sermon for those who are in a personal relationship with God through Jesus. This sermon is both a call to and description of the life and conduct of the person who has surrendered himself or herself to God through Jesus. The truth proclaimed in this sermon by Jesus is for only those who have dedicated themselves as disciples of Jesus and who have thereby received his Holy Spirit.

After describing the disciple's relationship to the law, in 5:17-48, Jesus then began describing and explaining, from 6:1 and following, how the disciple's relationship to God the Father makes a difference in everything he or she does. The Christian knows that ***God as Father, who sovereignly watches over and lovingly cares about every detail of the life of each of his children and all that they do.*** This fact changes the entire focus and orientation of every disciple's life.

- It changes why she gives to the needy (6:2-4),
- It changes why and how she prays (6:5-15),
- It change how she fasts (6:16-18).
- It changes what one treasures above all else and what one does with money and possessions (6:19-24).
- Jesus then forces the crucial question (in **Mathew 6:24**). *"No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money."* Whom will you serve? God or wealth/possessions?

Serving God brings greater blessings than does serving wealth.

- The first blessing is freedom from anxiety. Serving God the Father delivers one from the weight of worrying about the things of the world (i.e. clothes, food, and drink 6:25-34). If you seek God first and his righteousness, then all the necessities of life will be provided to you.
- The second blessing is freedom from condemnation. The disciple/child of God knows that he is not God and refuses to pretend to be him. Refusing to sit in the seat of judgment will keep you from coming under judgment. However, those who set themselves up as judges will bear the burden of their own standard of judgment. God is the only perfect judge. Serving God the Father brings freedom from judgmentalism and an overly critical and condemning spirit (7:1-5).
 - Yet, serving God requires right judgement, which (I argued last week) might be better thought of as discernment (7:6, see also 7:15-20). Serving God requires a right response to yourself and to the people around us.
 - Christians must first be able to discern the state of their own souls before we can rightly discern the state of soul of those around us.
 - Christians must be able to discern the difference between those who are fellow followers of Jesus and those who are not,

- Christians must be able to discern between true and false teachers, and true and false teaching, lest that precious gospel truth be wasted on those who seek only to twist the gospel into a means of attacking Christians.
- The third blessing is the confidence of knowing that he both hears and answers the prayers of his children (7:7-11). The calling and commands of Jesus in this sermon are impossibly high. How are we to embrace and obey them? It will only be through the divine assistance of God our Father and the very present help of His Holy Spirit. That this passage is addressed to those who are in a personal relationship with Jesus is assumed. Jesus speaks these words only to those who have been given the right to become the children of God, and to call God Father (see John 1:12-13).

Outline of Paragraph

The point of this paragraph is to motivate you to persistent prayer. In this paragraph Jesus teaches us three truths to move us toward persistent prayer.

First, if you want to receive, then first you must ask.

Second, even evil fathers know how to give good gifts to their children.

Third, God is entirely good, therefore persistently pray to him for all that you need.

There are some scholars who see this paragraph as being completely unrelated to all that has gone before. But if we think carefully, can we not see the flow of thought?

- In 6:19-24, Jesus calls Christians to *treasure God more than we treasure wealth/* possessions. How can we achieve this? Is it not only through persistent prayer to the Father for help?
- In 6:25-34, Jesus said that if we *seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness*, then our lives should be free from anxiety. How can we achieve this? Is it not only through persistent prayer to the Father for help?
- In 7:1-6, He calls Christians to *self-judgment, to rid ourselves of sin so that we can rightly discern* how to help each other to live holy lives. How can we achieve this? Is it not only through persistent prayer to the Father for help?

If so, then does it not make sense that Jesus, after having laid before his followers such a high and holy calling—which they by themselves along cannot achieve, would now seek to motivate the hearts of his children toward persistent prayer for these things?

If You Want to Receive, Then Ask, Seek, & Knock

Jesus begins this paragraph with a simple truth, *if you want to receive, then first you must ask*.

Matthew 7:7-8 (ESV) ⁷ "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened."

A Command, Not a Question

The three verbs—ask, seek, and knock—in v. 7 are *three imperatives*. Thus, Jesus is not asking a question, but rather he is three times making a command. He is commanding his followers to ask, seek, and knock. God wants his children to ask him to give them what they need. Our asking and seeking God for what we need is evidently pleasing to him. If we want to receive, then we must first ask. James says,

"You do not have, because you do not ask." James 4:2

Asking, Seeking, & Knocking Yield Certain Results

Obedience to the command yields sure and certain results.

*"Ask, and it will be given to you;
seek, and you will find;
knock, and it will be opened."*

There is no doubting here. There is no uncertainty here. Jesus is completely confident that obedience to the command will most certainly yield results. Obey the command, and your answer will be at hand.

Ask, Seek, Knock on God's Door

The object of the asking, seeking, and knocking is God the Father (v.11). Jesus is commanding his followers to focus their attention upon *"your Father in heaven who gives good things to those who ask him."* The certainty of the response is based upon the character of the one being asked. We will consider this more deeply in a just a bit.

Present Tense = Persistent Prayer

These imperatives in verse seven are written in the *present tense*. Thus, Jesus is communicating "a strong exhortation to **persistent** prayer."¹ The present tense refers to an ongoing, continuous action. In order to reflect this fact, the Holman Christian Standard Bible translates this verse,

Matthew 7:7 (HCSB) *"Keep asking, and it will be given to you. Keep searching, and you will find. Keep knocking, and the door will be opened to you."*²

Luke records that Jesus taught this same truth on another occasion and immediately before saying these very words (ask, seek, knock), Jesus used a parable (Lk. 11:5-8) to call his listeners to persistent prayer.

¹ R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 1, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 148.

² *The Holy Bible: Holman Christian Standard Version*. (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2009), Mt 7:7.

In the parable, a man goes to his neighbor's house at midnight to borrow some bread because a visitor had just arrived from a long journey and he has no bread on hand to feed his visitor. So he goes to his neighbor's house and knocks on the door, asking to borrow three loaves of bread. But the neighbor answers that it is late, the door is locked, he and his kids are in bed, and he does not want to get up. However, the man at the door persists in asking and knocking. Jesus explains what happened.

Luke 11:8 I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence³ he will rise and give him whatever he needs.

Jesus uses a very common experience, to which all of his listeners would have related, in order to teach that *persistence yields results*. Jesus is calling his disciples to be persistently in prayer.

The persistence is further emphasized by the corresponding repetition of the three verbs of verse seven again in verse eight, which are written as present, active, participles. Literally verse eight reads,

Matthew 7:8 (YLT) "for every one who *is asking* does receive, and he who *is seeking* does find, and to him who *is knocking* it shall be opened."⁴

"The repetition is meant to say, 'I mean this.'"⁵ The notion of persistence in prayer is strongly maintained by the continual use of the present tense. Jesus is commanding that his followers be committed to persistent prayer. And the one who persistently prays to God, will certainly discover that he is persistently answering those prayers.

Intensification of Participation

The notion of persistence is also illustrated by the progressive intensification of the three verbs, ask, seek, and knock. We have already seen that God knows the needs of his children before we ask him for anything (Mt. 6:8). But nevertheless, he still expects us to ask him. God prefers that his children come to him in prayer, asking and seeking and knocking at his door.

- The command, "*ask*," reveals that some requests require only a simple asking. This requires little effort. It is simply a mere request and what is requested is given.
- However, the command to "*seek*," requires more effort and more diligent persistence on our part. In seeking we must be moving and exploring and looking.
- The command to "*knock*," calls to mind even more persistence that is also mingled with waiting. It entails an obstacle and one that we cannot move ourselves, but implies dependance upon the decisive effort of another.

³ ESV uses the word 'impudence.' However, see footnote at that word, "or persistence." See also NASB.

⁴ Robert Young, *Young's Literal Translation* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 1997), Mt 7:8.

⁵ John Piper in the sermon, "Ask Your Father in Heaven," preached December 31, 2006 available at <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/ask-your-father-in-heaven> accessed 24 June 2023.

Different situations require different answers. This is reflected in the varied use of these words by Jesus.

Sometimes We Need More Communion with God

The progression of the words used by Jesus indicates that not only is persistence needed, but **a greater degree of communion with God** is required, in some instances, before we receive the answer that God wills to give. God is not stubborn, or grumpy, or reluctant to do what is good. He does not lack sufficient motivation to do what is right such that we must persuade him. We ought not think that God's moral character is so deficient that he needs us to twist his arm into doing what is good and right. So why must we "seek" and "knock?" Why can't we just ask and have what is needed?

God is perfect in his character. He is absolutely just and right in every way. He is good and holy down to the very core of his being. He is true and he is love. Thus, the delay in our receiving the preferred answer to our prayers and the timing of the answer, cannot be owing to some fault in him. For example, we must never think that since he delays in answering us because he does not know the gravity of our situation. We must never think, "If only God knew how desperate I was, surely he would answer. So I must tell him. 'Hey, God did you know....'" We must never think like that. Thus, the delay or refusal to answer our prayer in the way we wish it to be answered is not because God needs to change, but because we need to be changed.

The *seeking* and *knocking* **require us to linger longer in God's presence**. Such circumstances require us to sit in his presence and wait upon him. They require more concentrated focus of our attention and our mind. They require us to evaluate our motives. Perhaps our motives are wrong or sinfully selfish. James also says,

"You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions."
James 4:3

The word 'passion' here connotes *sinful* desires, not merely strong desires.

Summary

Jesus both commands and calls his disciples toward persistent prayer. Persistent prayer promises certain results. If you persistently pray, then you will find answers. Thus, if you want to receive, then you must go to God the Father asking, seeking, and knocking at his door in persistent prayer. If you want to receive, then you first must ask, seek, and knock.

Even Evil Fathers Give Good Gifts
to Their Children



The second truth Jesus offers in order to motivate you to persistently pray is the truth that **even evil fathers give good gifts to their children.**

Matthew 7:9-10 (ESV) ⁹ "Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? ¹¹ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"

All People Are Evil

Jesus here affirms the fact that every single human being—every one of us—is born with our souls corrupted by and bent towards evil. No human being is completely free from the presence of evil in his or her life. Notice the uncomfortable words Jesus speaks to his disciples. *"If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children..."*

You will recall, as I stated at the beginning of this sermon, that Jesus is speaking these words to his disciples. And yet he still says, *"...you who are evil..."* He does not say, *You who do evil*, but rather he says, *"... you who are evil..."* Jesus knows that evil lurks within the hearts of every human being. We are all capable of doing evil, because even yet resides within the hearts of us all, even us who are followers of Jesus. There yet remains in each of us the dark remnants of lurking evil. Even the apostle Paul struggled with this reality.

For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing that I hate. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I do not do the good I want [to do], but the evil I do not want [to do] is what I keep on doing. ... for sin dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. **Romans 7:15-21 (ESV)**

Paul is speaking in the present tense and thus he is speaking of his present experience. He wrote this after becoming of follower of Jesus. Even Christians are not completely free of the presence of evil. Whenever we want to do good, evil is always close at hand, seeking to subvert our obedience to Christ.

Even Evil Parents Make Good Breakfast

Despite this fact, even evil fathers can still do good things. Every earthly father is sinful and yet even evil fathers still have enough common grace to know how to give good gifts to their children. Even evil parents know how to fix a good breakfast for their children. I'm sure that none of you listening to my voice would say that your father was always good and never did anything that was evil.

Yet, did any of you ever ask your father for a cereal for breakfast and find him giving you a bowl of frosted gravel?

Did any of you ever ask your father for fish for dinner and have him deliver to you a plate of raw rattlesnake drizzled with viper venom?

This probably never happened. Even evil parents, who are confused about what is truly good, mainly desire to do good for their children. If it is true, that evil fathers answer the requests of their children by giving what is good, then what ought we to believe about God in heaven?

God is Good, So Pray Persistently to Him

The third and final truth in Jesus' argument to motivate you to persistently pray is the fact that God is good and only ever gives what is good. Therefore, pray to him always.



Matthew 7:11 (ESV) "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"

No earthly father is completely free from all evil, but God your Father in heaven is. There is no evil in God the Father. He is light and in him there is no darkness at all. He and he alone is good. In him is only holiness and no sin at all. He and he alone is perfectly free from evil. He and he alone truly knows what is good. Therefore, why would you not go persistently to him in prayer?

Think back to when you were a child, how often did you go to your father when you wanted or needed something. When you really wanted or needed something, then did you not persistently go to your father asking for whatever it was? I didn't keep count, but my daughter was persistently asking for a dog for two or three years. Eventually she got one. If we wounded and broken and sinful parents know how to give good things to our children who ask, then how much more will our perfectly good Father in heaven give good things to his children who ask him? God is good so go persistently to him in prayer asking, seeking, and knocking at his door. For God delights to give good things to his children.

Conclusion

Are you his child? Have you surrendered your life to him? The only way to become his child is through receiving Jesus as your Lord and Savior.

John 1:12 (ESV) But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,

Receiving Jesus is welcoming him into your life for who he actually is. He is God's only messiah and man's only savior. To believe in his name is to believe that he is the Son of God who was crucified, died, was buried, was resurrected from the dead, then raised up to heaven and seated at the right hand of God. Jesus and Jesus alone grants forgiveness of sins.

But not only forgiveness of sins, but also the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus and Jesus alone as the right and authority to pour out within your heart the presence of God's Holy Spirit. Luke tells us that on a different occasion Jesus taught the same truth we've been considering this morning and he phrased it slightly differently.

Luke 11:13 (ESV) "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

The greatest gift that God can give you is himself; his own Holy Spirit. All you have to do to receive this good gift is to ask. Since Jesus has died to atone for our sins, then if we ask God the Father for forgiveness of our sins through the death and resurrection of Jesus and then ask him to give us his own Holy Spirit. He will do it. He will answer that prayer. He will graciously give you himself if you will turn away from your sins.

If you want to receive, then you first must ask. Since even evil fathers know how to give good gifts to their children, then how much more does a perfectly good heavenly Father know how to give good gifts to those who ask him? Then go to him persistently for every good gift. The greatest good any human being can receive is to be given the gift of God's own Holy Spirit. If you ask, then you will receive.

Are you struggling to serve God more than you serve money, wealth, and possession? Then persistently ask our Father for help to treasure Him above all.

Are you struggling with anxiety? Then persistently seek God the Father for freedom from anxiety.

Do you find it hard to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness? Then persistently knock on God's door for the necessary transformation of your heart's desires.

Do you find within yourself a condemning, judgmental spirit? Then go persistently to God seeking from him to give you a gracious and forgiving spirit.

Do you find within yourself that when you desire to do good that evil is close at hand? Then persistently ask, persistently seek, and persistently knock at God's door to fill you with His Holy Spirit so that you enjoy more doing good than evil.

If you ask him, he will give to you.

If you seek him, he will let you find.

If you knock on his door, he will open it for you.

He is a good, good Father and there is no one like him in all the earth.