

Sunday Message: Matthew 7:7-12 (Ask, Seek, Knock, Do)

Possible readings: [James 4:1-10](#): [2 Samuel 12:1-8](#)

Bob:

Have you ever collaborated with someone on a work project? I have, on various teaching teams I've been a part of with InterVarsity. But this is a first for me at Smoky Row--and a first for Ben and me, at least when it comes to speaking. There was the time, a number of years ago when we teamed up and did a duet from *Man of La Mancha* where Ben was Don Quixote and I was Sancho Panza. Remember that, Ben?

But looking at this passage, which, in part is about fathers and sons, and the fact that this is Father's day, it occurred to us, wouldn't be interesting to do this together? We'll leave you to be the judge of that. At least you won't have to listen to just one of us speak the whole time!

Ben:

Ever since I knew this was going to be the passage we were speaking on I've had this little song stuck in my head from when I was in children's church. Perhaps you remember...

Do to others

Do to others

As you would have them do to you

Over and over again for several weeks now. It's been a fun time. I hope if I leave you with nothing else this Sunday, it'll be that little tune on the car ride home.

These last few Sundays we've been covering some of the most well-known ground in the Bible. These are the kind of passages we have on bumper stickers or on little wooden knick-knacks on our desks. Even if you're not a Christian, you probably think the Golden Rule is a good way to live. But there's more to this passage than just a few disconnected little sayings. In fact, different translations of this passage put 12 off by itself, connect it with 7-11 as we have done, or tie it to 13-14 which Rich'll talk about next week. Even though this passage seems to be just a collection of sayings, we think they tie together.

Bob:

So we decided to split things up. I'll speak about Matthew 7: 7-8 where Jesus makes some bold promises about prayer, Ben will unpack verses 9-11 on the parable of fathers and sons, and I'll then wrap it talking about verse 12, the "golden rule" verse, and what it has to do with the rest of what Jesus has just been saying. Then Ben and I will each share our own personal responses or applications of the passage, which might give you some ideas of how to apply the passage in your own life.

Jesus begins with three commands that come with connected promises:

Ask and it will be given to you;

*seek and you will find;
knock and the door will be opened to you.*

Many commentators observe the ascending sense of urgency in these commands. One might consider a child wanting something. If the parent is in the room, they ask. If the parent is not, they seek. And if the parent is in a room inaccessible because of a closed door, they knock.

Others have observed the idea of persistence, along with the increasing urgency. Asking, then seeking, then knocking. The idea is one of not giving up on what one is praying for.

I would have us notice that these aren't suggestions but commands. Grammatically, they are imperatives. You might also think of them as kingly invitations. You don't brush such things off lightly. Jesus wants us to ask.

I also want to focus on the promises. They appear to be very straightforward assurances that what is asked, sought, and knocked for will be granted. The repeated word here is "will".

I suspect that the question in many minds is, "but I have prayed for things that I never saw God answer." I asked for healing and I'm still sick. I sought direction but didn't get any. I knocked on doors as I sought work but am still unemployed.

A few thoughts:

- As the passage we read in James indicates, we can ask wrongly, simply to satisfy our own passions or while we are in conflict with fellow believers.
- Certainly there are times when God says "no" as when Paul prayed to be delivered of his "thorn in the flesh". In such cases, God's "no" is really a yes to something more important.
- In some instances, I have to say that we may not know why God hasn't answered what we've asked. There are some mysteries that may remain mysteries--at least in this life.
- Sometimes, it has been my experience that God wants me to persist, to keep asking, seeking, knocking. In fact, the verbs have the idea of continuous asking, seeking, knocking. I find that when I do this, over time my prayer changes as my thinking aligns more with what God wants and not just what I want.
- Finally, I actually wonder if we sometimes don't take these promises seriously enough that we are really bothered when we don't receive, find, or have doors opened to us. Do we say to God, "what gives" and keep praying, or do we say, "whatever." How often do we not even bother asking God about things we long for. The example of David and Bathsheba and Nathan the prophet's word is striking. Instead of taking his longings to God, David takes them to bed with a woman, another man's wife. The tragedy is that God, who gave David so much, would have given him more! As James says, we often have not because we ask not.

Ben:

Jesus then relates asking God to a child asking a parent in verses 9-11:

Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

I've been observing parents recently, trying to learn a few things. I had a great opportunity to do this a few weeks ago on vacation with Hannah's extended family. My niece and nephews are great kids. They like to call me "playset," largely because they enjoy jumping on me whenever I enter a room.

We ate most of our meals together and the kids did pretty well. I must admit I'm not sure I understand a kid who doesn't want to finish a piece of pizza, but I guess that's just the way I was raised. Usually a child doesn't have to ask for food, the parent just provides. A parent may sometimes ask what a child might like, and my nieces and nephews weren't shy about asking for dessert, but in the end they got what they needed, and a little of what they wanted too.

So if we're God's children, and God's supposed to take care of us, why do we have to ask?

Our relationship with our parents changes as we get older. When we're younger, often we're provided with what we need without needing to ask. "What's for dinner? Whatever Mom made." But as we get older, our relationship with our parents changes. We ask for more specific needs, help with homework, advice about a relationship, etc. And hopefully as we get older parents and children can talk with each other as adults. We're not peers, the parent-child relationship still exists, but we're able to interact with each other at the same level.

God wants us to ask so that we can learn to trust and depend on him, and to become the kind of people who can be his children without being stuck as kids. God is Lord, he's not our buddy just like our parents aren't our peers, but we can talk to him honestly about the things we need, and he will provide for them. So what kinds of things is God calling us to ask for?

I think it's interesting that Jesus speaks about bread and fish. In Matthew chapter 14 he will feed thousands with a few loaves and a couple small fish. In the desert in chapter 4, the devil will try to tempt Jesus into turning stones into bread. In the first example God's abundance feeds many who are hungry, and incidentally breaks the law of the conservation of mass. In the second Jesus resists easy solutions, instead waiting for God to take care of him. In both these passages bread was a fundamental need: in the case of the crowd it was because they had been following Jesus for days without stopping to eat, and in the desert it was because of a long fast.

The child in this parable isn't asking for a new toy, or an iPad. They're asking their parents to take care of them. I think we can see that this passage isn't an invitation for us to be greedy. I don't suspect this is a room full of people who are praying to God for a sports car, or a bigger house, but I also wonder about the kinds of things we do pray for. Are they things we need, or just things we want?

I also think it can be tempting to take this passage beyond physical needs. In a similar passage in Luke 11:13 it reads:

If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

It's true that by far the greatest gift that God can give us is the Holy Spirit, and through it knowledge of himself. Luke would later give us a vivid account of this gift in Acts. But Matthew keeps us rooted in the physical, in the needs that keep us alive and that allow us to grow into adulthood.

I appreciate this grounding in that it challenges us to think of tangible needs, ours and the needs of others around us. When someone asks us for help we can of course pray for them. We can ask that God lift whatever sickness or burden may have befallen them. Or we can get off our duff, cook a meal, or lend some money. We understand that just saying we'll pray for someone can seem a little unsatisfying as a way of showing we care. It can seem dismissive, especially if it's just a platitude. Instead, if we act for the needs of others, we may be an answer to prayer.

Prayer was needed in the wake of the devastating attack in Orlando last week. But they also needed blood. And people waited in a line more than a mile long for six hours or more to give. Now if we who are evil know how to do that, how much more will God give to those who ask?

I don't mean to discount prayer here. Obviously 7-8 calls for us to ask God, sometimes insistently for what we need. But as Dad said, prayer also puts us in a position to ask for the right things, and to change as we continue to pursue God. And sometimes prayer convicts us to action.

Bob:

And verse 12 is the action part. Jesus concludes this section of his teaching with this statement, which is often referred to as the Golden Rule:

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

Some have observed that this is hardly a new idea but one that crops up in various ancient writings. One, Emperor Alexander Severus, reputedly wrote this rule in gold on his wall, hence "golden rule."! Most versions say something like this:

"Do not do to others what you yourself dislike."

Do you see what is different about the way Jesus frames it? All the others put the idea in its negative form. Jesus frames it positively, not what you should avoid but what positively you should do toward others. And that, to me is the difference between the ethic of the kingdom, and the world's ethics, which often focus on baselines, and what to avoid doing wrong. There is no end to the ways we could practice this principle. Jesus says "in everything". Jesus is also very practical. He recognizes that we all are well aware of our own interests and pursue them and have a good idea of how others should treat us. He says, we should treat them the same way. I've suggested that this is a good principle in our witness with others. We should assume that they are as thoughtful about their decisions and beliefs as we are and treat them with the respect we would want. That doesn't mean all beliefs are equally true,

but simply that we should assume a level of thought and devotion to those beliefs that we would want others to recognize in us. But this can apply equally to how we drive, or to how we treat the property of our neighbors. In the wake of the Orlando shootings, it means we want LGBT persons to be as safe as ourselves.

The question though is how does this relate to the rest of the passage? Some would refer it back to last week's passage on judging, verses 1-6 of this chapter. In other words, judge as you would have others judge you. But I can also see how it would apply to prayer. Are we as generous and forgiving and attentive to others as we want God to be with us? Do we hope for God to be lavish in his love toward us? Are we stingy with our love toward others?

This whole passage is about relationships, and here, as elsewhere, our relationship with God and our neighbor is intimately connected. We may be hindered in receiving what we seek from God by how we treat our neighbor. On the other hand, when we open our lives to be conduits of blessing to our neighbors, it shouldn't be surprising that we enjoy the blessing of being heard by God, particularly because many of the things we ask, seek, and knock for have to do with those neighbors.

Ben:

The problem with passages like these is that our neighbors know them, and they know when we're not following them. I'm glad we didn't have "judge not, lest ye be judged" this week for that very reason. I think a lot of us follow the negative rule. "Do not do to others what you yourself dislike."

If we leave each other alone to our own devices, if we don't bother anyone, then we're following this rule, not the Golden Rule. It's kind of like if a doctor stopped at the Hippocratic Oath, "First do no harm." Sure that's a good principle, but at some point you kind of hope they'll get around to some doctoring.

I'm as guilty of this as the next person. I don't give of my time and my money as often as I could. I'm not always the most attuned to the needs of others around me. I live a lot of my life inside my own head, planning my next book or thinking about a problem at work or just daydreaming, without paying enough attention to real people who I could bless. This is a passage that convicts all of us at one time or another.

And yet I think there is also great hope in these verses. We see a God who is eager to give if only we ask. God knows our needs better than we know them ourselves, like a caring parent. And I wonder if part of the reason these two passages are together is that we're being shown the spirit in which we should give to others. God gives us great gifts if we ask, and we in turn can bless others in the way that God blesses us.

Bob:

I'm challenged by this golden rule thing and it's connection to prayer. Like you, I'm struck by the positive way Jesus frames this. It is not just avoiding the bad that we wouldn't want to happen to us. It is seeking the good of others that I would want for myself. I'm challenged by the idea that my prayers might be hindered because I don't seek in prayer or in the way I act toward others what I want for myself. Right

now in our work we are coming down to the end of our financial year. Do I want my team members to reach their goals as much as I want to reach my own? Do I pray that way? And do I pray? Am I generous with resources to help them succeed? Am I as generous in my own giving as I hope others will be?

So, where does this hit home for you? Are you challenged to take seriously Jesus' commands and promises about asking, seeking and knocking? Are you encouraged that God really wants to respond to you like the best Father ever? Or do you recognize ways you need to put the Golden rule into practice in your own life? Are there ways you want God to act toward you that you need to practice with others? Whatever it is, this is pretty basic stuff to pursuing the life of the kingdom. As Jesus says, "this sums up the law and the prophets."