

Sermon preached at Woodbury Community Church, Woodbury, MN on Sunday,
September 25, 2011, by Rev. Brian D. Schulenburg

MATTHEW 7:7-12

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

9 “Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? 11 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 good gifts to those who ask him! 12 So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT: LIVING AS CITIZENS OF GOD’S KINGDOM #30 PURSUING CHRIST-LIKE CHARACTER

It is Men’s Retreat weekend, and yesterday our speaker shared with us the difference between an educator and a teacher. An educator has the ability to teach students a lesson in such a way that they will apply it to their lives and remember it forever. Many people can teach a lesson, few people can teach a lesson in such a way that it will be remembered forever. All teachers desire to be educators. He then read the following story.

“A principal of a small middle school had a problem with a few of the older girls starting to use lipstick. When applying it in the bathroom, they would then press their lips to the mirror and leave lip prints.

Before it got out of hand, he thought of a way to stop it. He gathered all the girls together that wore lipstick and told them he wanted to meet with them in the ladies room at 2pm. They gathered at 2pm and found the principal and the school custodian waiting for them.

The principal explained that it was becoming a problem for the custodian to clean the mirror every night. He said he felt the ladies did not fully understand just how much of a problem it was, and he wanted them to witness just how hard it was to clean.

The custodian then demonstrated. He took a brush on a long handle out of a box. He then dipped the brush in the nearest toilet, moved to the mirror and scrubbed the lipstick stains.

And that was the very last day that the girls pressed their lips on the mirror!”¹

That principal was an educator! And, so was Jesus. Last week we talked about how Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount. As He shared the principles of Kingdom living with those gathered to hear His message, Jesus took the time at the conclusion of His sermon

¹ <http://www.blap.com/joke.php?query=93>

to give some very practical application. Matthew chapter seven is in many ways the application to the rest of the Sermon on the Mount.

Everyone can relate to the desiring something so much in our lives that we have devoted significant time, energy and resources into acquiring that thing. When I was a 16 year-old high school student I had a friend named Steve who desired an El Camino vehicle. He had been saving every penny earned from the time he was 13 to the time he was 16 to purchase an El Camino. For three years he saved paper delivery money, birthday money, Christmas money, babysitting money, allowances, lawn mowing money and money found between couch cushions to buy his beloved El Camino. When his sixteenth birthday arrived, he bought his car. He was the first of my buddies to own a car, and we were all jealous of his El Camino, and all secretly admired the work ethic and determination of our friend Steve.

My daughter Breanna saved up her money for almost an entire year when she was about eight years old to purchase the Samantha Parkington, American Girl doll. I'll never forget the trip to the American Girl Doll store in Chicago where my little girl proudly purchased her doll. She couldn't have been more pleased.

I know people who have saved up for years to take a dream vacation, purchase a cabin up north, pay off a mortgage, buy a pontoon boat or purchase a diamond ring. I bet you have something in your life that you have saved up for too. It could be that you have even asked God for these things. Who hasn't said a prayer where we have asked God to bless us with a material thing? For years, as a kid, most of my prayers sounded like, "God give me this or God give me that." In fact, when I was growing up, I even had two Bible verses that I used to justify my desire for material blessing. They are the next verses in our Sermon on the Mount series. So, if you have your Bibles, open up once again to Matthew 7, and we will begin by looking at verses seven and eight.

What comes to mind when you hear these Bible verses?

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

I used these verses as a child to justify my prayers for more stuff. I treated God like He was a cosmic genie up in the sky, waiting to answer my requests for more. And, I'm not the only one. I have had people say to me over the years, "Pastor Brian, I've been praying that God would give me a Porsche for the longest time. God just doesn't seem to care about my prayer request. Prayer might work for you, Pastor, but it doesn't work for me. After all, if it did, God would give me a Porsche!"

When I ask them why they think that, they will often times take me to Matthew 7:7-8. "Pastor," they will say, "Don't these verses tell us that if we ask we will receive, if we seek, we will find, and if we knock that the door will be open?"

The verses do indeed indicate that God will answer the prayer talked about in these verses, but my childhood faith, and the faith of these friends of mine is an immature faith in need of correction. There is an entire theological system based upon verses such as these known as prosperity theology, which basically says that God wants you to be rich and happy and healthy. Matthew 7:7-8 has nothing to do with us receiving material blessings. It has everything to do with the greater story of the Sermon on the Mount. It has everything to do with us living as citizens of the Kingdom. It has to do with us receiving spiritual treasure.

Kent Hughes writes, “This famous text is not *carte blanche* for our material desires. Rather, it tells us how to pray for the character of the kingdom in our lives. It instructs us how to pray the Lord’s Prayer. It teaches us how to pray that our morals and ethics will be like Christ’s. In a word, Jesus teaches us how to pray for our spiritual lives.”²

Look again at the verses: 7 “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

One of the first things that we notice in verse seven are the verbs, “ask, seek and knock.” Each of them builds upon the other. When you and I ask someone for something it means that we need to humble ourselves. I don’t know about you, but it is difficult for me as a guy to ask someone else to help me meet my needs. We should never hesitate to ask Christ to supply our needs, because He is our ultimate Superior. We come before Him humbly recognizing that He is our provider. But we’re not just asking. The passage also uses the verb, “seek.” Seek moves us from merely asking for something to putting legs onto that action. Seeking involves effort on our part. It doesn’t just depend upon God. It means that we are actively involved in looking for what it is that we are asking for. Knocking, the third verb that Jesus employs in this verse, expresses the idea that we are to persevere in our prayer. We keep knocking on a door until it is opened.

This is where the Greek language is helpful. In the Greek language, Jesus employed the use of the “present imperative” tense when he used the verbs, ask, seek and knock. Understanding this makes a big difference in understanding this verse. The present imperative carries the idea that the action that is being described is continuous. So, when Jesus says, “ask,” He is really saying, “keep on asking.” When he says, “seek,” He is really saying, “keep on seeking.” When he says, “knock,” He is really saying, “keep on knocking.”

So, the big idea of verses seven and eight is that we are to pray with persistency. And what are we praying for? Again, in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is imploring us to pray that the character traits of the citizen of the Kingdom of God would be evident in our life. How often do you spend time praying for your own spiritual growth? We

² Kent Hughes, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway books, 2001), p. 234.

have no trouble praying about finances. We have no trouble praying for loved ones who are sick. We have no trouble praying for our children. But, God is calling us in this passage to pray for our spiritual maturity.

Hughes writes, “(But) do we persist in our prayers for spiritual growth for ourselves and others? Do we ‘ask . . . seek . . . knock’ for a pure mind? Do we keep on knocking for a forgiving spirit or for removal of an angry or critical spirit? I think that Christians usually do not! Consider what would happen if god’s people understood what Christ is saying here and put it to work . . . We give ourselves to passionate prayer for our spiritual development only when we sense our need for God’s grace. God’s kingdom requires righteousness – perfection. We are called to be holy as he is holy (Leviticus 19:2). Only the ‘pure in heart will see God’ (Matthew 5:8). We know that though we do good things, we are evil – that all of us, Jews and Greeks, are under sin (Romans 3:9). The sight of God’s perfect standard and our sin drives us to our knees and to his grace. We learn that there is no hope apart from his unearned favor. There is no hope for spiritual improvement apart from his continuing love and mercy. The one who seeks this rejoices when he reads Jesus’ invitation to ‘ask . . . seek . . . knock.’”³

I don’t know if you recall the last verse of Matthew 5. But, in Matthew 5:48, after beginning the Sermon on the Mount with the Beatitudes, and after talking about being salt and light in our world, after talking about the law, murder, adultery, divorce, vengeance and loving our enemies, Jesus concludes his introductory chapter of the sermon with this one verse:

48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Be perfect! Friends, you and I are incapable of this. In Matthew 5-6 Jesus has shown us the requirements of being a citizen of the Kingdom of God. We can’t possibly meet these requirements. That’s why we pray with consistency. We pray that His grace would be present in us. We pray that His transforming power would be at work with us. We pray with consistency for Christ to be lifted high in us.

I read a great story this week about Howard Carter, the archeologist who discovered King Tut’s tomb. Many of you were at the King Tut exhibit at the Science Museum this summer. The discovery of Tutankhamen’s tomb is still considered to be the world’s greatest archeological discovery. Did you know that people had searched for Tut’s tomb for over twenty centuries? It took Howard Carter over six years of searching to find the tomb. The amazing thing is that there were two times during those six years that Carter was within two yards of the first step that led to the entrance of the burial chamber.

Carter was persistent in his search for King Tut’s tomb. That is how God wants us to be with prayer. There is a great spiritual treasure that is ours as we persist in prayer.

Matthew 7:7-11, taken as a whole, show us that we can pray with confidence.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 235, 236.

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

This is a promise from God’s word. Hughes puts it simply, “The only condition for our receiving spiritual treasure is persistence.”⁴ Some of you have prayed for things throughout your life and never seen God answer that prayer the way that you hoped he would. Experience will tell anyone who has walked with Christ that there are some prayers that we have prayed that had God answered them the way that we wanted Him to, it would have ended disastrously for us. God knows what we need better than we do.

Howard Hendricks is a distinguished professor at Dallas Theological Seminary. He tells the story of when he was a young man and many mothers had their eye on him as the future husband for their daughters. “One mother even said to him, ‘Howard, I just want you to know that I am praying you will be my son-in-law.’ Dr. Hendricks asked his seminarians very solemnly, ‘Have you ever thanked God for unanswered prayer?’” Hughes writes, “I am grateful that God has not answered all my prayers too! And so are you. On the other hand, how wonderful is it that he has always answered your and my personal prayers for spiritual growth.”⁵ God will always answer your prayer for spiritual growth.

Jesus shows us this principle by giving us two illustrations from earthly fathering in verses nine and ten.

9 “Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake?”

Jesus shows us that it is absurd to think that He will not take care of His children. What earthly father would feed his child a stone when they asked for bread?

When we had Monte Abeler’s farewell service a few months ago we had a dessert reception after the second service. We served cake, mints and some mixed nuts. There were plenty of mixed nuts left over, so we put them back in the can and had them here at the church office. One day, I was hungry and walked over to the mixed nuts and took a handful. As I was eating the nuts, I bit into something hard. It was a small rock that had somehow made it into the can of mixed nuts. There was immediate pain that came as I bit down into that rock. God shows us that we can pray with confidence when it comes to our spiritual growth. He’s not going to give us a stone when we need bread. He’s not going to give us a snake when we ask for fish.

Verse eleven sheds light into what God will do.

11 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 good gifts to those who ask him!

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

Do you like gifts? I do. From childhood, I have always liked giving and receiving gifts. I would get so excited about birthday parties as a kid that I'd literally get sick in anticipation of all the great things that were in store for me on that day. When I purchase gifts for someone else, I can't wait to give it to them. I have to restrain myself from going right to the person with the gift that I have purchased on the day that I buy it from the store. I want them to have it right away. I want them to enjoy it as soon as possible. Age has taught me that there is something good about giving and receiving a gift at the right moment.

When we're children we make Christmas lists, full of the gifts that we desire for Christmas. Have you ever made a spiritual gift list? Have you thought about the spiritual growth that you would like to experience in your life?

When I first came to Woodbury Community Church, I preached a series of messages on the fruit of the Spirit, which is found in Galatians 5:22-23.

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

These are the qualities of a follower of Jesus Christ. Like the Beatitudes, mentioned in Matthew 5, the fruit of the Spirit are indicators of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. These aren't natural qualities that as human beings we are capable of producing in ourselves. They require the surgical precision of God's scalpel.

In 2 Peter 1:3-8 we read about the kind of life that God wants to produce in us.

³ His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. ⁴ Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

⁵ For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; ⁶ and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; ⁷ and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. ⁸ For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

God takes great delight in producing spiritual growth in our lives. Are you ready to let Him do so?

Kent Hughes writes, "Our assurance is this: God will give us anything that is good for us spiritually (anything!) if we keep asking him for it! If you do not yet have eternal life through Jesus Christ, you may be sure he will give it to you if you ask with all your heart. If you are a believer but are short on Christian graces, you need to keep praying. If you often find yourself lying, if you begin to 'ask' and 'seek' and 'knock,' God will help you become a truth-teller. If you are not generous, make a habit of passionate prayer and he will give you

a generous spirit. If you are not kind but persistently seek God for a kind spirit, he will give it to you.

Just think what would happen if we prayed for ourselves and our brothers and sisters as intensely as we pray for our physical needs. The church would explode because a far greater proportion of its people would be living kingdom lives. Our pulpits would be filled with preachers of power. The mission fields would shrink as thousands more poured out to the harvest – with greater power.”⁶

Jesus concludes this section of teaching by showing us that we are to live with authenticity. We pray with persistency, we pray with confidence and we live with authenticity.

Living with Authenticity – vs. 12

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

Over the years, this teaching of Jesus has come to be known as “The Golden Rule.” I found this old Wizard of Id cartoon this week that demonstrates how some think of the Golden Rule.



Citizens of the kingdom of God demonstrate that they are authentic sons and daughters of God when we live with authenticity. We honor others above ourselves. We treat them with dignity. We do not repay evil with evil. We do not seek revenge. We rejoice when others rejoice. We love the unlovable. We extend grace to the extra grace required. We demonstrate patience. We live the fruit of the spirit. We live in his power not ours. We are only capable of consistently treating others with the dignity of the “Golden Rule” when we allow the power of the Holy Spirit to flow through us.

I think we can all think of times in our lives when we’ve responded just the opposite. When I was a youth pastor in Illinois, I had a volunteer that drove me nuts. I had replaced a youth pastor who had been at the church for 18 years. He was a legend in youth ministry. He had been instrumental in the spiritual development of this particular volunteer, and as far as the volunteer was concerned, there was nothing that the new youth pastor had to offer the church. He constantly criticized me, belittled me in front of students, and undermined any decision that I made. One night, on a leadership retreat with students, I lost it. This volunteer was once again undermining everything I was trying to do. We were teaching the students about the character qualities of a follower of Jesus Christ, when during a game of capture the flag, the volunteer decided to use his considerable size advantage (he was close to seven feet tall and weighed close to 400 pounds) to put me in a strangle hold. I

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

don't remember all of the details, I just know that for the first and only time in my adult life, I got into a fist fight with another man. Here were these two adult role models fighting in front of students. The guy was so big that he just kind of put his arm out in front of him and stopped any force that I had. He ended up laughing, and in some crude way I gained his respect. But, I lost a lot of respect with my students. And, I became so aware of my own spiritual immaturity. I had a lot of growing up to do. And, I still do. My guess is that you do to.

So, here is what I'd like you to do this week.

Application

1. Write down a list of some of the spiritual qualities that you lack. Add these qualities to your daily prayer list. If you don't have a daily prayer list, start with asking God to help you become a person of prayer. Put the list in a spot that you will see it every day.
2. Ask a spouse, parent, brother, sister, close friend, pastor, someone to hold you accountable to praying for these things.
3. Ask God persistently to help you with these things.
4. Pray with confidence that God will answer your prayer
5. Live with authenticity, journaling how God has helped you grow in your walk with Him.