

Ask, and It Will Be Given (Matt. 7:7–11)

By Jacob D. Gerber

The Sermon on the Mount spans an incredible range of themes. In Matthew 5, Jesus largely focused on the absolute standards of the Law—and, therefore, on our hopelessness to attain for ourselves a righteousness that will exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees (Matt. 5:20). In Matthew 6, Jesus criticized false piety and the deceptiveness of earthly treasures and anxieties. Now, in Matthew 7, after sharply warning us not to judge with a legal mindset, Jesus now offers words of incredible comfort and consolation in regard to how God hears our prayers. In Matthew 7:7–11, Jesus teaches us that *when we pray, God only gives us good gifts*.

God Gives Good Gifts (Matt. 7:7–8)

Matthew 7:7–11 connects closely with Matthew 6:25–34, the passage that came before the previous passage (Matt. 7:1–6).¹ At the end of Matthew 6, Jesus urged his disciples not to be anxious, since “your Heavenly Father knows that you need...all [these things]” (Matt. 6:32). Then, Jesus taught them to “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matt. 6:33). Now, in the present passage, Jesus is teaching his disciples about *how* to seek the kingdom, in spite of the difficulties and distractions they may face: “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (v. 7). We may understand the intervening passage (Matt. 7:1–6) as identifying the chief hindrance in seeking the kingdom (namely, a legal judgmentalism that does not perceive our own moral blindness), and the current passage as pointing to the chief solution: persistent prayer to our loving Father in heaven.²

Accordingly, Jesus urges us to pray: to ask, to seek, and to knock (v. 7). Then, Jesus promises that everyone who so prays will receive, find, and gain an open door (v. 7–8). Lenski observes that each of these imperatives in v. 7 are in the present tense, so that they describe an ongoing, iterative action of growing intensity: “‘go on again and again asking, seeking, knocking.’ The use of three verbs indicates intensity; and to seek is more fervent than just to ask, and to knock is still more fervent. We ask for what we need; we seek what we earnestly desire; we knock when our desire becomes importunity.”³ Or, as Henderson puts it, “Seeking is *asking plus acting*. ...Knocking is *asking plus acting plus persevering*.”⁴ In the case of asking and knocking, the passive responses (“...will be given...will be opened...”) “are so-called divine passives: God is the one who will give (cf. v. 11) and open the door.”⁵

¹ For a thorough consideration of this point, see France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 278–79.

² Carson, “Matthew,” 222.

³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 292–93.

⁴ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 362.

⁵ Hagner, *Matthew 1 – 13*, 174.

Jesus' language is remarkably expansive. Here, Jesus puts no immediate limits on what may be asked for, sought out, or knocked to gain. This does not mean, however, that Jesus is promising that we may receive absolutely anything we desire, for two major reasons. First, Jesus has only a few verses earlier taught us to pray that *God's* will be done, not that *our* will be done (Matt. 6:10).⁶ Second, France makes an important observation about how we see praying working in the rest of Matthew's Gospel: "Perhaps we should note, too, that even in this gospel there are in fact circumstances when the door will not be opened to someone who knocks (25:10–12; cf. 7:21–23), just as there are prayers which will not be answered (6:5, 7; and cf. Jesus' own 'unsuccessful' request in Gethsemane, 26:39)."⁷

These limitations do not, however, contradict Jesus' teaching here. As Leon Morris writes, "This is not Jesus' complete teaching on prayer....Here he is simply making emphatically the central point, that prayer to a loving Father is effective. The point is not that human persistence wins out in the end, but that the heavenly Father who loves his children will certainly answer their prayer."⁸ Or, as Calvin notes, "Nothing is better adapted to excite us to prayer than a full conviction that we shall be heard....we learn from it, that this rule of prayer is laid down and prescribed to us, that we may be fully convinced, that God will be gracious to us, and will listen to our requests."⁹ Jesus is not saying that we can receive absolutely *anything* we desire, but he is saying that our Heavenly Father loves to grant us what we request. While God knows all of our needs, nevertheless, God also "commands us to pray, that he may grant to our requests those blessings which flow from his undeserved goodness."¹⁰

God Does Not Give Evil Gifts (Matt. 7:9–10)

In the first section, Jesus gave the positive aspect of his teaching on prayer: God gives good gifts to those who ask him. In this second section, Jesus presents the same truth from its negative point of view, to insist that God *never* gives evil gifts to his children: "Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent?" (v. 9–10). These are phrased quite strongly, as Lenski observes: "The interrogative particle μή [*mē*] expects a negative answer: 'he will certainly not hand over a stone to him.' Even among men sonship and fatherhood preclude such a thing."¹¹ Clearly, Jesus is giving absurd ideas to illustrate how silly it is for us to imagine such a thing.

Why, though, does Jesus resort to such imagery? While we would never expect such a thing from a human father, we do something like this in our expectations of God. We often feel like we are waiting for the other shoe to drop, or to see how God might lead us into something that will harm us. Whether it is because we feel that God ultimately doesn't care about us, or because we perhaps see God as an overly aggressive personal trainer who will pursue "gain" regardless of the

⁶ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 130.

⁷ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 279.

⁸ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 169.

⁹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 1:351–52.

¹⁰ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:353.

¹¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 293.

“pain” that it will involve, we fundamentally misconstrue God. D. A. Carson explains this well: “What is fundamentally at stake is a person’s picture of God. God must not be thought of as a reluctant stranger who can be cajoled or bullied into bestowing his gifts (6:7–8), as a malicious tyrant who takes vicious glee in the tricks he plays (7:9–10), or even as an indulgent grandfather who provides everything requested of him. He is a heavenly Father, the God of the kingdom, who graciously and willingly bestows the good gifts of the kingdom in answer to prayer.”¹²

Earthly fathers don’t give evil gifts, and neither will our Father in heaven.

God Only Gives Good Gifts (Matt. 7:11)

The point of Jesus’ comparison in the previous section, however, is not to suggest that the relationship of earthly fathers to their children is the same as our heavenly Father to us. Rather, Jesus goes on to explain that we can expect much more and much better from our heavenly Father than we do from our earthly fathers: “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!” (v. 11). The word “you” in this verse is emphatic, and by it, Jesus “dissociates himself from sinful humanity by using the second-person form of address (‘though *you* are evil,’ v. 11).”¹³ Whatever is true in a small way for evil, human fathers, is true in a much larger way for our loving heavenly Father.

Again, we must ask why Jesus has to say this. Here, Jesus is giving the key qualification for his limitless promise from v. 7–8. Yes, we *will* receive everything for which we ask; *however*, we will only receive what will be a good gift for us. So, God will not give us a stone when we ask for bread, and he will not give us a serpent when we ask for a fish. Much more than that, Jesus is also saying that God will not give us a stone or a serpent if we should ask for them. Instead, God will give us *only* good gifts. As Calvin observes, “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.”¹⁴

Calvin also demonstrates how these words direct us back to what Jesus taught us previously:

This does not exclude other benefits, but points out what we ought chiefly to ask: for we ought never to forget the exhortation, Seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all other things shall be added to you, (Matthew 6:33.) It is the duty of the children of God, when they engage in prayer, to strip themselves of earthly affections, and to rise to meditation on the spiritual life. In this way, they will set little value on food and clothing, as compared to the earnest and pledge of their adoption, (Romans 8:15; Ephesians 1:14:) and when God has given so valuable a treasure, he will not refuse smaller favors.¹⁵

By this, Jesus therefore gives us an extraordinary promise, with an extraordinary qualification. God

¹² Carson, “Matthew,” 223.

¹³ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 130.

¹⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:353.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:354.

will give us every good gift for which we ask (v. 7–8); however, he will protect us against harmful gifts, because he truly knows how to give us good gifts. This doctrine should lead us to pray—not to get more stuff from God, but to come to know better our Father who is in heaven.

Discussion Questions

1. How does this section about prayer fit in with what Jesus has said in the previous sections of the Sermon on the Mount? What is the difference between asking, seeking, and knocking in prayer? How would you characterize Jesus' promises about what we can expect from prayer from vv. 7–8? What requests burden your heart right now? If you are honest, what keeps you from persevering in prayer for those burdens more than you do?
2. What does Jesus mean by the illustration of the earthly father in vv. 9–10? Is Jesus saying that our heavenly Father is just like our earthly Fathers, or something even stronger? Why does Jesus have to assure us that our heavenly Father will not give us evil gifts? If you are honest, what kinds of evil gifts do you feel God might give you—even if you wouldn't say it, or don't explicitly think it? Why do you feel that God may treat you that way?
3. If evil people know how to give good gifts to their children, how much more will our heavenly Father give us good gifts (v. 11)? What does this statement tell us about what God will give us when we unwittingly ask for evil gifts? How do we cultivate trust that when God does not give us what we ask for, he is nevertheless giving us something that will ultimately work together with all things for our good (Rom. 8:28)?
4. What picture of God governs your prayers? What experiences in your life have shaped this picture of God? What picture of God does Jesus give us here? What experiences in your life would support Jesus' picture of God in prayer? What experiences in your life give you pause from trusting Jesus' picture here? If you woke up tomorrow fully believing Jesus on this point, what change would you first notice in your prayer life?