

Asking Is Receiving

Matthew 7:7-12



Do you want your children (or grandchildren) to ask you for things? Well, mostly! I agree that sometimes nagging can be irritating. Like if the family rule is that we don't buy trick-or-treat candy until the day before Halloween, but the displays in the grocery store have been up since mid September? And then for weeks, when the kids come grocery shopping with you, you have to listen to "PLEEZE can we buy these M&Ms?" Or Skittles. Or whatever they've seen the most ads for. And you have to keep saying, "No, it's not October 30th yet," and telling them to stop pestering you.

But what if the kids never asked you for anything? That would be a lot worse. If my kids had never asked me for anything, ever, I would have been terribly worried. What was wrong with them? Were they depressed? Were they caught up in something I didn't know about? Why didn't they feel they could ask me for things? Was I being a terrible mom? You'd probably react the same way if the kids never asked you for anything.

The point is, yes, we do want our children (or grandchildren) to ask for things. Even if they whine or pester. We do want to give them good things, and do our best by them – because we love them. How much more, then, does God want us to ask for things, just because he loves us? This is what Jesus says, and he should know! Today's reading is from Matthew 7:7-12. Hear now the word of God.

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

“Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? 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! So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.”

Here ends the reading of God’s Holy Word. (Thanks be to God.)

The Church of the 49ers, in the Columbia State Historic Park, prepared and served dinners every Monday evening, for anyone in the community who wanted to stop by and eat. And as pastor, I would talk to our guests. Often they would tell me about their problems; and I would listen and sometimes ask if they’d prayed about it. The answer to that was usually, “No, I don’t want to bother the Big Guy Upstairs.” How grieved God must have been, to hear that! We would feel badly if our children never asked us for what they wanted, right? How much more grieved would God be, if his children never asked him for what they wanted!

I guess that’s why Jesus has to explicitly tell us that God WANTS us to ask. And seek. And knock. For whatever we want, for whatever is on our mind, for whatever reason. It doesn’t have to be some big holy thing. For instance, if we’re worried about a car starting up in the morning, it’s fine to pray about it. And who knows? Maybe God will respond by reminding us to take the car to the mechanic! We can pray any time, about anything, as often as we want, and we will never wear out our welcome.

And the reason why God wants us to pray any time, about anything, is because praying strengthens our relationship with him. When we are asking him for something, that means that we’re aware of him, that we trust him, that we know he is listening. It’s sort of like how we are when our kids are bugging us to buy them Halloween candy in September. We’re not going to buy the candy if the family rule is that we don’t buy it until October 30th. But if the kids are asking, they are at least communicating with us. They are listening. They know we are listening. Even if we tell them no, at least we heard them, which builds their trust. In the same way, God wants us to ask for whatever it is. And seek him out. And knock on the door of heaven. God wants us to be open and honest with him.

But what if we ask God for something, and it doesn’t happen? Then what? Do we decide that if God didn’t do what we asked, that that means he doesn’t care about us? Or that he doesn’t love us, just because our prayers weren’t answered in the way we expected? If we’re in that situation, then we need to remember that God’s focus is not on giving us whatever we ask for. He’s not a vending machine, after all! God’s focus is on transforming us to become the people he intends us to be.

For example, suppose you are a student. You’re studying hard because finals are tomorrow. But you’ve just caught the flu. So you pray, “God, I could do a lot better with the finals tomorrow, if you would only heal me. Please, heal me from this flu.” And God’s response back is, “Accept your

limitations.” How is that a good thing? Well, it teaches us that God is a lot more concerned about our ability to accept the fact that we are human and we are not perfect, than he is about our test scores. A test score won’t matter once we’re out of school. But being able to accept our human limitations is a gift that will help us throughout the rest of our lives. God’s focus is on transforming us to become the people he created us to be. And as we keep on growing in our experience of prayer, we keep on learning to trust God more and more, even if the answer is “No”.

Okay; but what if the situation is a lot more tragic than not doing well on an exam? CS Lewis wrestled with that question. He didn’t marry until late in his life, when he was 58 years old; but what he lacked in length of time, he made up for in depth of passion. His wife Joy Davidman died of cancer four years after their marriage, and he was devastated. A year after her death he wrote a book under a pseudonym, called “A Grief Observed.” It’s a record of his struggles with God during the horrible first year after Joy’s death. He wrote things like, “When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing Him...if you remember yourself and turn to Him with gratitude and praise, you will be – or so it feels – welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence...I tried to put some of these thoughts to C this afternoon. He reminded me that the same thing seems to have happened to Christ: “Why hast thou forsaken me?” I know. Does that make it easier to understand?”

But Lewis hung in there with God in all honesty; and by the end of the year, he had grown tremendously in his faith and trust. Of course he’d had faith and trust before. He did believe what he wrote about, after all. But in that horrible year, his faith grew to the point where he could say, “The mystical union on the one hand. The resurrection of the body, on the other. I can’t reach the ghost of an image, a formula, or even a feeling, that combines them. But the reality, we are given to understand, does....The (apparently contradictory) notions will all be knocked from under our feet. We shall see that there never was any problem.” Much good came from God’s “No.” Not only was Lewis himself transformed, but so have been the millions who have read “A Grief Observed” during their own times of suffering. They have been transformed too.

Lewis described prayer as being so very powerful that sometimes God’s “No” is necessary, or else we would destroy ourselves. We are human and we are limited by space and time. But prayer is not. Prayer is unlimited by space or by time; prayer is more than we can understand or comprehend. So, said Lewis, that’s why God has retained the power of granting or refusing our prayers; except on that condition, prayer would destroy us.

God has given us a gift that we can barely even begin to understand. And using it is a privilege beyond anything we can understand. And yet, Jesus says, “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.” It’s as though Jesus is saying, “Here’s a gift. Right here. It’s beyond anything you can understand or imagine, and yet it’s yours. And you can open it any time you want, as often as you want! So here, take it!” Wow! What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer, as the hymn says!

When we ask, we may not receive the specifics of what we ask for. But we will receive. We will receive a closer relationship with God, which will bless us and also the people around us. We need never be concerned about “bothering the Big Guy Upstairs.” He wants nothing more than for us to come to him, and talk to him, and receive from him whatever is best for us.

And what’s best for us is more than just what’s best for us as individuals. As we grow closer to God in prayer, we also begin to see our fellow humans as companions on the journey, rather than as servants, or opponents, or enemies. When we see ourselves as companions, that gives us all a focus that’s beyond our personal preferences. And it becomes easier to do what Jesus tells us to do – to treat others the way you’d like them to treat you. Jesus gives us our true selves in the Golden Rule.

For example, a friend of mine worked as a barista at Starbucks for several years. She eventually quit, not because of the long hours or the hard work, though both those things were true. She quit because of the rudeness of the customers. People would scream at her over the exact details of a cup of coffee! A cup of coffee, compared to war or earthquakes or famine or homelessness? What do you think Jesus would say about that?

What if all of Jesus’ followers could see one another as companions on the journey? Maybe then we could see our planet as the precious gift of God that it is, and treat it accordingly, as Adam and Eve were directed to do. Maybe then we could respond to sin by surrendering it to God, and trusting God to sort things out. Maybe then we could learn what it means to be truly human.

Learning to treat others as we’d like to be treated starts by growing closer to God. Which, as Jesus says, starts by asking him for what we want. So, let’s pray. Let’s take (2) (3) minutes of silence, and just pray, silently or whispered, anything you want to say. I will close our time of prayer in a few minutes. // [end prayer by acknowledging that all of us make mistakes; all of us have a hard time seeing things from God’s POV; ask for forgiveness and closeness to Him so that we truly can treat others as you want us to do.]