

There is a Way
Series: Kingdom Culture ~ The Sermon on the Mount
Matthew 7:7-14 and others
August 16, 2009

On any given week as I stand before you, I know that many of you find yourselves in the midst of tough times, challenging and maybe confusing situations. It may not be apparent from the smile you carefully applied when you got out of your car, but I know there's a lot of pain out there on any given Sunday. I cannot imagine a better or more comforting statement to help us in the midst of life's trials and troubles than what Jesus says in our passage from the Sermon on the Mount for today. Among all the very challenging statements and commands of Jesus we've studied so far this summer, the first part of what we come to today is pure comfort and encouragement. Matt. 7:7-8.

It is an absolute promise: Ask, seek, knock, and you *will* receive, you *will* find, you *will* have the door opened. Wow. We must not assume that just because God knows what we want and need He will provide it. Jesus says we must ask. And Jesus doesn't seem to put any limits on what we can ask for here, either. He just says, "Ask." But to understand these verses more accurately, a short Greek grammar lesson is necessary. Imperatives are command words. There are two kinds of imperatives in Greek. The one Jesus uses here – "Ask, seek, knock" – is a present imperative which is a command to do something and keep on doing it indefinitely. "Ask and keep on asking. Seek and keep on seeking. Knock and keep on knocking." In other words, persistence and perseverance are key in the matter of prayer. We are to pray confidently and boldly with persistence. Don't just ask God for something once. Don't just seek God's guidance occasionally. Ask and keep on asking, seek and keep on seeking. And you *will* receive, Jesus says, you *will* find.

But maybe you're thinking: "Well, I've asked God for things I didn't get. I've pounded on the door to heaven and begged God for *fill-in-the-blank* and it didn't happen. I didn't get what I asked for, I didn't find what I was seeking. In fact, I got exactly what I *wasn't* asking for. So how do you explain that in the light of what Jesus says here?" Let's remember that God is not some kind of cosmic vending machine: We put in a prayer and out pops whatever we ordered.

It does sound a bit like that. But we know it cannot mean that because we've all asked for stuff we haven't gotten. Since Jesus cannot be lying or wrong, there must be something more we need to understand. This is a key principle for understanding the Scripture. If you read something in the Bible that *in your experience* is not true or seems wrong somehow, the problem is not what you read in the Bible, the problem is not with what God has said. The problem is with your experience, or at least your understanding or interpretation of your experience.

Now, context is always important in understanding the Bible. So, we need to read on to understand: Vv. 9-11. As is true for so much of the Sermon on the Mount, this promise of Jesus has to do with relationships. Indeed, the entire Christ-following life is about relationships. And the key relationship here is that God is Father to the one who believes in and receives Jesus as Lord and Savior, the forgiver of their sins and leader of their life. Every human being is created in the image of God. But not every human being is a child of God. 'Child of God' status comes only with faith in Jesus. John 1:12.

God is a good and gracious and loving Father who delights to give good gifts to His children – as any loving father does. So, if we do not have what is good, the fault does not lie with God. We

have failed to ask. OR what we are asking for is *not good* for us and so being the good Father He is, God will not give it to us.

Our children ask us for things all the time that we do not give them because we know – being older and wiser – that what they are asking for is not good for them to have. Because we love them and want what is best for them, we don't give them everything they ask us for. It's the same with God. God knows better than anybody else what is truly good and right and best for us to have. He knows the difference between good and evil in a way no one else does. Sometimes we ask, we seek, we knock, we beg, for something that seems good and right to us, but God does not grant our request. Sometimes that's because God has something even better He wants to give us that we are not even asking for. Or sometimes we are not ready to receive whatever we are asking for yet. Sometimes God has to do something *in* us to prepare us to receive what He wants us to have – what is truly best for us to have.

You may wonder: “Why is prayer even necessary if God already knows what I'm going to ask for and what He's going to give me?” Here's why: Prayer is the way we show our trust in God as our loving heavenly Father. Prayer is the way God has chosen for us to express our conscious need of Him and our humble dependence and reliance on Him. Listen: It is absolutely key that you realize that God is your Father, and that He is loving and good. Because people tend to pray in harmony with their view of God. If you see God as a harsh Judge just sitting up in heaven looking for a reason to punish you, or a cosmic Traffic Cop watching and waiting for you to break a rule so He can throw the book at you, that is how you will pray. Timidly, fearfully, anticipating punishment and judgment. But if you see God as your loving Father – not just *a* loving Father, but *your* loving Father – taking delight in you, desiring to give you all good things and provide everything you truly need for a life of joy and power and peace – if *that* is how you see God, you will pray differently. You will pray like a child asking their daddy for something. Children come boldly and unashamedly to their parents to ask for what they want.

This is what Jesus is saying here: Because God is your Father, He will never give you what is evil or bad. He will only give you what is good. He will only give you what is *best*. Because He loves you and wants only what is best for you. Maybe the greatest defect in the lives of many Christ-followers is the failure to know God the Father the way we should know Him: As our loving Father who wants to give us all that is good, not necessarily all that we *want*. But all that is good. And God alone knows what is truly good and best for us to have, and what is not. Now, sometimes we can't see *how* something God has given us could be good or *why* something we ask for *isn't* good and therefore God doesn't give it – *that* we may not understand.

But know this: God never makes a mistake. He never has and He never will. He is never caught by surprise by anything that happens. He never gives anything to His children that isn't good, and He will not fail to give to His children everything that *is* good. He can't. He doesn't just *know* what is good. He doesn't just *do* what is good – He *is* good. Good is the essence of who God is.

And one more thing: If you have been asking for something that God *isn't* giving you, you might want to stop and ask yourself whether or not God has said, “No.” “No, my child, this is not good for you to have,” but you have just missed it because it is not the answer you want.

Jesus goes on then to make what is probably the most universally praised statement He ever made: V. 12. What we have come to call the ‘Golden Rule’ was found in the negative in the teachings of

the rabbis of Jesus' day, as well as in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. "What is hateful to yourself, do to no other." But Jesus makes it a *positive* statement: "In *everything*, do to others what you would have them do to you."

Now, we know the Golden Rule so well that I don't think we often consider what it really means. What it really means is that in *everything*: In *every* situation, with *every* person, I have to ask myself, "How would I like to be treated?" and then treat others that way. It sounds really simple because we've been hearing it our whole lives, but I submit to you that it is exceedingly difficult to do. One reason it's so difficult is because generally we think, "How would I like to be treated?" and stop there. We focus on how we want to be treated and seek that out, rather than seeking to treat the other person that way. It's hard to live the Golden Rule in everything as Jesus commands. Because we are usually too focused on ourselves: what we want, what we like, what will make us comfortable, etc. etc. It's that old 'what about me?' thing.

The Golden Rule requires that we be *other*-focused. Concerned more about what *others* want, what *others* need, what will make *others* comfortable. Most of us, if we're really honest, do not think this way naturally most of the time. Think for a minute about somebody who really tweaks you. Somebody you're angry with or a situation that frustrates you. Somebody you come into contact with and you just can't be nice to them. Got somebody in mind? Okay, now to apply the Golden Rule to that person, ask yourself how you would like to be treated by them in the same situation? Don't make excuses in your mind why they don't deserve it. No 'yeah, buts.' Jesus said, "In *everything* do to others what you would have them do to you." In *everything*.

So, how would you want them to treat you if the situation were reversed? The Golden Rule says you must answer that question honestly and then treat that person that way. To really live the Golden Rule, I need to ask for and seek out God's love and grace. Most of us will have to ask and keep on asking for God to help us care about the needs of others more than our own needs. It will not come naturally to most of us. We cannot live the Golden Rule unless God helps us to see other people as He does, and love them as He does. We have to ask, seek, knock, and keep at it.

If it seems like the Golden Rule and all the other stuff Jesus requires of His followers in the Sermon on the Mount is too hard, too idealistic, that it sets an impossibly high standard – here is the answer: Ask, seek, knock. Ask for God's power to love your enemies. Seek God's perspective on life and situations, and especially on people, so you won't make judgments harshly or hypocritically. Knock on the door of heaven and ask God to help you to quit worrying and give you the desire and ability to live as the Kingdom citizen God created you to be. Ask, seek, knock and keep at it because it will not come easily.

Let me remind you of something we said at the very beginning of this series: The Sermon on the Mount is not just to be studied and admired. It's not just to be read and memorized and quoted. It is actually to be lived. Jesus intended that His followers live this way. There is a way to be salt and light. There is a way to live a holy life as God defines it, to live in right relationship with God and people. There is a way to enjoy a blessed life. But it's a hard way and most people don't choose it.

That great theologian, Yogi Berra, once said: "When you come to a fork in the road, take it." Here is what Jesus says about the ultimate 'fork in the road' of life. Vv. 13-14. There is a way that leads to life in all its fullness, Jesus says. But it is a narrow way and you can only enter it through a narrow gate. There is another way to live, a broad and spacious way. A wide gate leads to that road.

That's the way most people go. But that way leads to destruction. When you come to that fork in the road where you have to choose between the narrow way and the broad way, choose the narrow way, Jesus says. If you choose to apply the Sermon on the Mount to your life, to try to live every day in every way these words of Jesus, it's going to be hard. It's the narrow way, and few choose it. Look around. Few choose it. There is a way to right relationship with God. There is a way to holiness and purity. But it's a narrow way and few choose it. There is a way to love your neighbors *and* love even your enemies. There is a way to stop worrying. But it's a narrow way and few choose it.

Listen: You will not drift into living the Golden Rule, or anything else in the Sermon on the Mount for that matter. You will have to decide. You will have to choose: the narrow way or the wide way. And Jesus says it's a life and death decision. He was not the first to offer this choice, by the way. Moses set the same choice before the children of Israel millennia before Jesus preached on that hill beside the Sea of Galilee: Deut. 30:19. "You have a choice," Moses said. "Life or death, blessings or curses. You choose." Moses said "You have a choice," Jesus says. "The narrow gate and the narrow road that leads to life OR the wide gate and the broad road that leads to destruction. Enter through the narrow gate," Jesus says. "You choose."

Now, when Jesus says, "Enter through the narrow gate," this is the other kind of Greek imperative. This is an aorist imperative. An aorist imperative is a command to do one particular thing at one specific point in time. This is not, "Enter and keep on entering through the narrow gate." This is, "Choose once and for all to enter through the narrow gate. Choose once and for all to stay on the narrow road." Have you made that choice? Have you personally decided to take the narrow road, the road less traveled, the road that leads to life?

Jesus Himself is the narrow gate leading to the narrow way that leads to life. He is the Way to the way. First, you have to choose Jesus. And that's as simple as admitting that you can't do it on your own, you need a Savior, that Jesus is the one and only Savior, and acknowledging that He is *your* Savior. If you have never really made that choice – and you can't inherit it, it's not about going to church, or doing enough good stuff – if you've never really personally made that choice, let today be the day.

But choosing Jesus also means choosing His way – once you choose to enter through the narrow gate, you need to stay on the narrow way. Being sheep-like as we are, we start off on the narrow way, following Jesus, but we have a tendency to wander off. If you have chosen Jesus but found yourself wandering from the narrow way, let today be the day you choose to get back on that road.

The team is going to come and we're going to sing – a song of decision, commitment, re-commitment. If you need to do business with God, this is your time. You may come and kneel for prayer as you commit yourself to the narrow way. You may commit or recommit yourself right where you are. There is a way that leads to the life you've always wanted, the life that Jesus died to give you. He *is* that Way. His way is the narrow way, but it is the *only* way. You need to choose.