

## MATTHEW 7:7-12

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We are still in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is still teaching from a hillside on the northern end of the Sea of Galilee. I remind you of this because we have been in this section for some time now. Once we get to chapter 8, things will move a little more rapidly. Why so long in this section? How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time. There is a great deal to chew on here. But we can run the risk of not connecting all the dots when we spend such a great deal of time on one passage. To appreciate all Jesus has said thus far and what He says throughout the sermon, we need to be sure we don't break it up so much that we fail to connect all the dots.

We have already seen Jesus loop back and touch on something He said previously in the sermon and that is where we find ourselves today. Today, in verses 7-12, Jesus goes back to the topic of prayer.

In order to fully appreciate what He is saying, we need to think in Hebrew, as opposed to the Greek way we have been raised to think, especially when it comes to prayer.

In the English language, prayer is largely defined by the idea of asking. In old English one could say, either to God or to anyone else: "I pray thee to do such and such." The basic concept here is heart-felt request. The Jewish concept of prayer, however, is best defined by its Hebrew word "*tfilia*" (תפילה).

The primary meaning of the verb "lehitpalel" (להתפלל), the verb behind the noun, is self-judgement or introspection. Especially in Jewish Hassidic traditions, *tfilia* is understood to be an introspection that results in bonding between the creature and the Creator, as a child would bond with his/her father.

It is not a surprise that when the Jewish Christ was asked by his disciples how they should pray, he taught them what to request, making sure to address their Heavenly King as "Our Father" (Matt. 6:9). Shortly before that Jesus warned them to avoid using vain repetitions that characterized pagan approaches to prayer (Matt. 6:7).

In Isaiah we find a curious text: "... *these I will bring to My holy mountain, and make them joyful in the house of my prayer*" (וְשִׂמְחָתֵם בְּבַיִת תְּפִלָּתִי). Note the wording: not "**my house of prayer**", but "the house of **my prayer**." (Isaiah 56:7; Barachot 7A)

But how is it possible for God to engage in prayer? And with whom?

The answer lies in understanding that Hebrew prayer is not only a "request-making session." It is a communal bonding between God and his child. The house of "his prayer" is, therefore, where God himself engages in introspection and in so doing bonds deeply with his people. They in turn reciprocate this action in their own prayers and bond with Him.

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

Having expressed some very hard truths, Jesus now exhorts His followers to pray. **Why revert back to prayer? Because your prayers will be heard.**

Cute acrostics?

Ask, Seek, Knock – perfect tense; continue asking, seeking, knocking.

Carte blanche? No. We don't this approach to prayer in the Bible. Prayer, for the most part isn't for selfish ends but for the glory of God and kingdom concerns.

The antidote for worry (verses 25-34) is a robust confidence in God's willingness to give us all we need. The focus is on need rather than desire.

Jesus has spoken of such things as righteousness, humility, sincerity, purity and the love expected of His followers. Such gifts and the ability to live them is to be sought through prayer.

Jesus' sermon began with the acknowledgement of personal bankruptcy – has provided a model for prayer, where kingdom concerns took priority over the mundane things in life, and the provision for our daily needs. If we focus on the attributes of the Christian such as humility, sincerity, purity, righteousness and love, then we can quickly find ourselves being overwhelmed. We do not possess, within ourselves, the ability to live this way.

But now Jesus assures us that He has supplied the means to accomplish the impossible. And prayer is the means to this end.

There can be no misunderstanding as to the importance of prayer. I've heard it said that is the preparation for battle. But I have to disagree. Prayer is the battle.

**"One may be a truly industrious man, and yet poor in temporal things; but one cannot be a truly praying man, and yet poor in spiritual things."**

**Brunner**

This sermon is so interwoven. We cannot live as Jesus would have us live without prayer, yet without a new mind, we won't be a praying people. And then, if we do pray, our requests, our priorities can be off target.

### **James 4:1-3**

**1 Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? 2 You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. 3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.**

This is the context in which our asking, seeking and knocking must be seen. A Christian, with a new mind, a new worldview, a new way of thinking, a new set of priorities, prays and thinks in a way in which the world-ling cannot.

So, are we to then be afraid of asking or asking amiss?

*9 Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? 11 If you then, being 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!*

**We are safe in our prayers!**

There is no need to be afraid to ask. Even the best of us can sometimes ask amiss, even in ignorance because many times we don't really understand what we really need. This is why the Holy Spirit intercedes for us.

### **Rom. 8:26,27**

**26 Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. 27 Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God.**

The Apostle Paul is saying the same thing Jesus alludes to here with the analogy of fish and bread. God won't give us what we don't need or what is bad for us. We are free to ask and we are free to knock and we are free to seek, just as most

children are. But we as parents know, that our children don't really need all for which they ask. Some of their requests would be harmful for them.

If you have been praying for something and you feel you haven't gotten an answer, it could very well be that that thing for which you are asking is not what is best for you.

What happens when you don't give the child what they want? Many times they will pout or throw a fit. As a parent this can be painful because we know that our denial of their request is really best for them though they can't see it.

What do we do when God denies a request of ours? Often times we pout and even throw a fit. We may even feel god doesn't love us or care about us. As a parent, we may have heard that also. "You just want to ruin my life! You don't really love me!"

### **Sound familiar?**

But if we look carefully at what Jesus is saying, we can only be made to feel safe! God won't give us what will harm us! We may acquire it elsewhere, but it will be to our detriment. Just as if we deny a child's request but they go around us to get what they want, when we go around God to get what we think will satisfy us, we can reap the consequences of our actions. Then what happens? We get ourselves into a situation from which we need to be rescued.

We adults, especially those that are struggling right now, need to look at this from this very standpoint. Though we are adults, we are still children, both in our attitudes and in the fact that we are children of God.

What is fundamentally at stake here is our picture of God. Seeing him as our sovereign, not our sugardaddy; seeing him as a benevolent father rather than a genie in a bottle is paramount!

Recognizing God's generosity and the expectation of only good from Him as opposed to the frailties and failures of our human parents is the point Jesus wished to get across here. This should really change our approach to prayer from one of a wish list to the Hebrew concept of introspection and communion with the one, true God!

### **Jeremiah 29:13**

**13 And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart.**

Next we get to a verse that can to many seem to be a bit disjointed.

**12 Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.**

This is known by most as the, **“Golden Rule.”**

**Verses 7-11 speak of how we should relate to God. Verse 12 speaks to how we should relate to others.**

What we call the Golden Rule is not something unique to Christianity. Confucius stated essentially the same thing some 500 years prior to Jesus.

Rabbi Hillel, the father of Paul’s teacher and the grandfather of the Gamaliel mentioned in the gospels was once challenged by a Gentile to summarize the Law in the short time the Gentile could stand on one leg. His response?

**“What is hateful to you, do not do to anyone else. This is the whole Law; all the rest is commentary. Go and learn it.”**

What is different is that Jesus stated the rule in the affirmative and not the negative. The way Jesus stated it speaks to sins of omission and not just commission. (Explain)

When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment or we might a summation of the Law, He answered this way.

**Mt. 22: 34-40**

**34 But when the Pharisees heard that He had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. 35 Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, 36 “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?”**

**37 Jesus said to him, “ ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the first and great**

commandment. 39 And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

**The Golden Rule must be lived in conjunction with the Greatest Commandment.**

It must come from the heart. **Jesus lifts the Golden Rule, stated in the positive from a lofty ethical aspiration to a normative manifestation.**

Meaning that it isn't to be just some pie in the sky ideal but what one should see as normal behavior for those empowered to walk in the Spirit by the blood of Jesus Christ. This should be normal for those who claim to be followers of Jesus.

But that isn't possible outside of having the good gifts and attributes Jesus has already mentioned in this sermon. And those gifts cannot be had or maintained without prayer.

In his sermon, "The Disciple's Prayer" Haddon Robinson wrote of a game he played with his children when they were young. (Trying to get pennies from his clinched fist. Once a finger was pried loose, it had to stay open. Once the children pried all his fingers loose they would run away, delighted that they had their pennies.)

Sometimes when we come to God, we come for the pennies in His hand.

"Lord, I need a passing grade. Help me to study."

"Lord, I need a job."

"Lord, my mother is ill."

**We reach for the pennies. When God grants the request, we push the hand away. More important than the pennies in God's hand is the hand of God himself. That's what prayer is about.**

And I would add, going back to the Hebrew definition of prayer, that more important than the hand of God, is the face of God.