

The Sermon on the Mount: Life in the Kingdom

Sermon #8

Big Idea: Don't Be Timid, Expect an Answer

Matthew 7:7-12

Ray Anderson – July 31, 2022

Good morning, people of Grace. Welcome to our online group also.

When I was eight years old, my family began to attend a small Presbyterian church in Atlanta. I remember that summer going to Vacation Bible School and learning about Jesus' love for me. I memorized Psalm 23 and learned the song "Jesus Loves Me" in three different languages. After that for a period of time, we began to go regularly to church, and I learned the Apostle's Creed and the Lord's Prayer, because we said those things every week. I can remember feeling, though, that God was somewhere far off in the distance, and for some reason, there was a certain way to approach Him, and I certainly didn't know what that was or even how to achieve it as a nine-year-old.

I think part of that mindset came to me because of the way I heard the pastor speak about God and, actually, to God. When he talked about God he used very a very dramatic and reverent tone. Clearly, God was holy and we were not. When he prayed, he seemed to have this special prayer voice, and his words were very purposeful. "O holy and merciful God, we beseech Thee to show Your compassion in our frailty ..." I just couldn't imagine that was the way he talked to his wife during the week. "O magnificent wife of mine, I beseech thee for dinner tonight ..."

Well, it just made me feel that there was a certain way that wasn't natural that we were supposed to approach God with, and certainly as a nine-year-old I didn't know what that was or how to do it. So, I just formed this opinion that God was off there somewhere and relatively unapproachable.

To appreciate what Jesus is doing in the Sermon on the Mount, you need to understand that mindset I had when I was nine years old. See, this group of people that He's teaching—they too thought God was far off; that He was on His throne, yes, but unapproachable to common, ordinary men and women. To a fisherman or a tax gatherer or a beggar or a wife or a child, God

seemed unapproachable. They didn't have the right clothes to wear, they didn't have the right education, they didn't know the right words, and they didn't have a very good "God voice."

What's so radical about Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is that Jesus is bringing God close to them. And then, He brings them close to God. He's calling God "Father." He's saying "Our Father." He's saying, "Your Father knows what you have needs of. Your Father cares for you more than the birds of the air or the flowers of the field. He loves you. Can you love that kind of God?"

We know this is happening and that he's blowing the minds of these people because of what we see at the end of His sermon. After He's finished, it says this in **Matthew 7:28-29**: "When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at His teaching"—boom!— "...because He taught as one having authority, not as their teachers of the law."

Today in our continuation of the Sermon on the Mount, we're going to look at **Matthew 7** starting in **verse 7 through 12**. Jesus is talking about prayer again. Here's the passage, **Matthew 7:7**: "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 the one who knocks, the door will be opened."

We all know what it means to ask, seek and knock. There's no agricultural metaphor here of spreading seeds or raising sheep that we don't know anything about. We get the concept. There are no secret Greek words here or verb tenses that give special meaning to these words. We understand it as ask—seek—knock.

There is a progression of intensity here that's implied when we put these three words in this sequence. You ask regarding your needs. You're seeking God in His wisdom and insight. And you're knocking as an expression of persistence in your asking and seeking. We're to approach prayer with expectation that He's going to answer—that we'll receive an answer. Ask—seek—knock.

Don't let it rush by you too quickly, though, because it's so obvious. You should view prayer as asking and seeking and knocking, so that when you pray you don't become timid and you expect an answer.

Jesus is going to illustrate His point here, going on in **verse 9**: "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!”

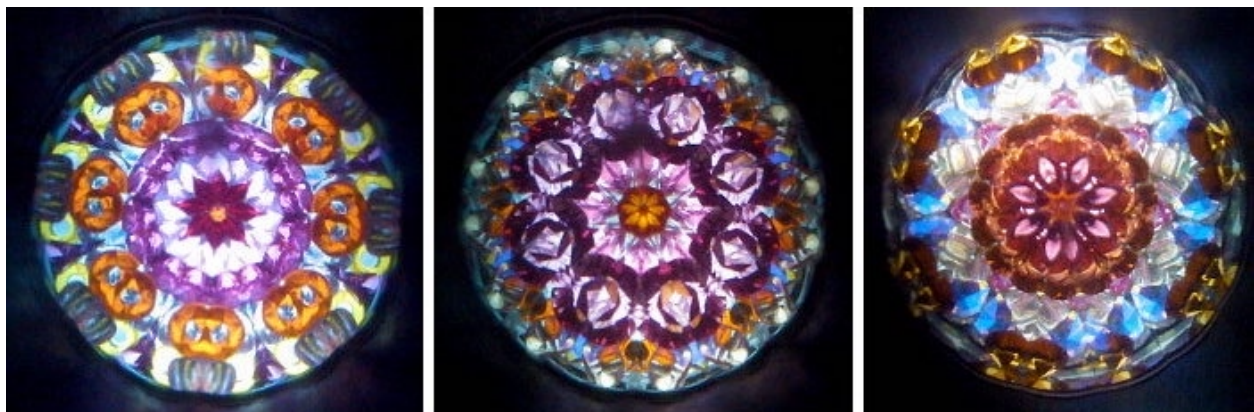
Jesus is appealing to a relationship between the one who’s asking and the one who’s responding—a family relationship. He’s arguing from the lesser to the greater. If you, being a good earthly father, though you’re totally evil and selfish compared to God, do good for your children whom you love, how much more is this true of a perfect heavenly Father?

Jesus is telling us to not be timid in our prayers, because we’re talking to our Father. Your Father loves you. He knows what you need before you ask. He loves you more than all of creation. You don’t have to have a God voice, you don’t have to have magic words; you talk to Him like a child talks to His father.

So when you pray, don’t be timid. Expect an answer, because you’re talking to your Father.

So, how should we pray to incorporate this ask and seek and knock?

Well, what I’d like to do is explain this same passage in three different contexts. Let’s think of it as a kaleidoscope. In a kaleidoscope, when you turn it, you look at exactly the same elements. It’s groups of colors. But they’re rearranged into a whole new different, beautiful view. So, I want to share with you this passage of ask, seek and knock in three contexts.



The first is the block. And by that, what I mean is the immediate context—what happens before and what’s right after.

The second is the theme. There’s a theme of prayer that goes through the whole Sermon on the Mount.

And the third is the flow. We started at the beginning, and at chapter 7 now, we’re towards the end. And that context gives us another angle to look at with ask, seek and knock.

Context #1: Block of Verses – Immediate Context

So, the first context, the block, the verses that are immediately around it, we have to go back to **Matthew 7:1-6**, which David preached on last week. It's this whole deal about people. We're instructed to not judge others because we don't want that same standard of judgment to come back on us. We're challenged to think about not just the speck in our brother's eye, but maybe what's blocking our own vision—the plank. We're to not judge others, but to discern the type of person we're interacting with here. You don't want to give what's sacred and precious to a dog or a pig. Dogs and pigs are people who don't grasp or care for the things of God that are holy and sacred. And those people can actually turn on you and hurt you. Some people you're supposed to walk away from.

Well, how do you know when you're being judgmental and when you shouldn't be? How do you know that there's a plank in your own eye? How do you discern whether this person is a pig or a dog? How do you decide when it's time to walk away? How do you know?

You ask; you seek; you knock. In your prayers, you're not to be timid in asking your Father to give you wisdom and discernment and insight into the people that are in the context of your life. You're supposed to be asking God for that kind of wisdom.

In **James**, the brother of Jesus writes this, **verse 5 in chapter 1**: “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.”

Do you need wisdom discerning the people in your life? Well, don't be timid; ask, seek, knock. The help you need is closer than you realize. Then expect God to give you wisdom to discern the situation that you're in, the people that you're interacting with.

Now earlier, when I was reading today's passage, I left off the last sentence of the paragraph. So, I need to bring it into this context. It's **Matthew 7:12**: “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.”

We call this verse “The Golden Rule”: Do unto others and you would have them to unto you. It's a good rule to guide us in how we should treat other people. The standard for treating them is not some mystery to discover. We get it. Treat them the way we'd like to be treated. That should be normative behavior for followers of Christ.

But here's the deal. That passage on doing is in the context of a passage on prayer. So, how does the Golden Rule relate to prayer?

Well, the people towards whom you have a tendency to be judgmental—pray for them. The people that you're discerning might be a dog or a pig—pray for them. The enemies that you've been instructed to love—pray for them too.

And how should we pray for them? We should pray for them the way we wish they would pray for us. We don't want someone out there praying for our destruction. Well, pray for them, that they would draw close to God, so that what is sacred and precious would become sacred and precious to them. Pray that God would reveal Himself to them with His provision and care for them so that they would learn to love God and care about the things of God. Don't be timid: ask, seek, knock on their behalf.

So, the verses around this passage of ask, seek, and knock give us this immediate context to the concept here. Don't be timid in your prayers; expect an answer. Ask, seek and knock for wisdom in the relationships with other people.

Context #2: Thematic Context

That's the first context. Now let's turn the kaleidoscope. The second context is the theme or the thematic context. So, throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is teaching in two ways. One is linear and the other is circular. All through the summer now, we've been teaching this sermon in a linear fashion. We've been going from passage to passage, topic to topic, in a linear way. That's the way the sermon was presented.

But there's also something else going on in the sermon. There are themes that Jesus keeps going back to in the course of the sermon. And with every circle back to those, He's adding to the person's understanding about that topic or theme. You could actually reteach—we could repackage the whole series under these kind of themes. So, I would encourage you, if you haven't picked it up already, to read Matthew 5, 6 and 7 this week, but look for the themes.

Here are some of them:

The Kingdom

Rewards

What is done in secret

Like the pagans

God being a Father

Prayer

Prayer is one of those themes in the Sermon on the Mount. So, to understand a second context for this ask, seek and knock passage, we need to look at that in this thematic context. So that we won't be timid in our prayers, let's look at this context. So, I'll just read through these passages on prayer, all from the Sermon on the Mount:

Matthew 5: "But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven."

Matthew 6: "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, don't keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard with their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you even ask."

Verse 9: "This, then, is how you should pray:

'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name,

Your kingdom come, Your will be done,

On earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors.

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."

Later in **Matthew 6, verse 16:** "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

Matthew 6:31: "So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them."

And then, **Matthew 7:** “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.”

See, embedded in the Sermon on the Mount are at least nine principles, from my count, at least, that Jesus is giving us on how we should and shouldn't pray. Ten times in just these verses, Jesus uses the term “Father” to describe your connection to God in prayer. God is not distant, He's not unapproachable. He's your Father. Two times tells the audience that the Father knows what they need before they even ask. Two times we're told to pray for our enemies or our adversaries, the regular people in our lives. We are to pray about everything—daily bread, forgiveness for yourself and others, deliverance from temptation and the evil one, your enemies, God's will, God's kingdom to come, for wisdom and discernment regarding people.

Paul puts it this way in **Philippians 4:** “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

We're supposed to pray about everything and in every situation. Living in the kingdom is developing a healthy dependence on your heavenly Father. We need to see ourselves as absolutely dependent on Him. Prayer is our expressing that dependence on God in every situation and about everything. So, whatever you face, you better pray!

Ask, seek and knock is the final passage on prayer in the Sermon on the Mount. So, in the thematic context of Jesus' teaching on prayer overall, He's saying here, *Don't be timid. Ask, seek and knock in every situation and about everything. And then, expect an answer.*

So, in the block, the first context, in that view of the kaleidoscope, we saw that we're not to be timid in asking for wisdom about dealing with people in the context of our life.

In the second, the thematic view, we're to not be timid, but to pray about everything, because we're absolutely dependent upon Him. And prayer is that expression of dependence on Him.

Context #3: The Flow of the Overall Sermon

The third context we need to put this in—let’s turn the kaleidoscope again—is the flow. What I mean by that is that Matthew 5 is the start of the sermon. We’re now in Matthew 7 towards the end of the sermon. And so, that gives a particular context, too, for this whole asking and seeking and knocking.

Now remember the audience, what I said about them, comparing them to me, my mindset when I was nine years old? To a people that started out thinking that God was far away and they don’t really know how to bridge that gap, Jesus has shown God to be their Father. He’s closer to them than they think. He loves them more than all of creation, more than they can imagine. He knows what they need before they even ask. His power and resources are limitless and are available to them.

Jesus is looking out on this audience of His and seeing light bulbs go on. *Hmmm ... Oh ...that’s what God is like? That’s what the heavenly Father thinks of me?* And Jesus is saying, *Yeah, that’s what He thinks.*

So, what do you want to ask Him? What are you really seeking? What obstacle appears to be in your way that you need to knock on? Ask, seek, knock. They’re paired with “given, find, opened.” We should pray and expect God to answer us—maybe not in the way that we think, maybe not in the time that we think He should answer, but we should expect Him to answer.

It was a Saturday morning. I don’t like to go to HEB on Saturday mornings, but I needed to. I had promised some smoked ribs for my family, and so I went. It was already crowded and I roamed the parking lot looking for a place to park, and not one of those tiny ones I couldn’t get out of.

So, I prayed, “Lord, would you open up a parking place, a wide one, down front?” I’m a pastor—I’m supposed to pray bold and specific prayers. Right then a F150 starts to back out in front of me. God answers prayer!

And then I laughed at myself. I could ask the Father for anything, and I just asked for a parking place at HEB. Moses asked to see God’s face. David asked to dwell in the presence of the Lord forever. Solomon asked for wisdom to lead his people. Ray Anderson asked for a parking place at HEB. One of these is not like the other.

Now, I don't think there's anything wrong for asking for a parking place. God says to pray about everything and in every situation. But here's the point. If the main characteristic of my prayer life is just about my comfort and my conveniences, I'm missing it. Jesus is saying that the Father is available to me.

I keep a quote over my desk—I put things on my bulletin board to remind me of stuff I need to remember. One of them is a quote by **Ken Boa**, an author and professor. And it says this: “Most Christians prefer the better life of God's blessings over the better hope of His presence.” We prefer God to bless us more than to be with us. Do you see how wonky that is?

Jesus, actually, at this point in the flow of the sermon, is being a bit tongue-in-cheek with us. He's using hyperbole here. *Ask me, and it will be given; seek me, and you'll find me; knock at the door of my throne room—it's open, come on in. Get into the game. Come one. Ask, seek, knock. Ask me.*

From these three contexts, the block and the theme and the flow, we get a fuller understanding of what we thought was a simple concept of ask and seek and knock. See, prayer is talking with your Father about the people and the things that are in your life. We're supposed to expect Him to answer, but we leave whatever that answer is going to be in His hands, and the timing in His hands. But He says He will answer, so don't be timid in your prayers.

I think prayer should be both a part of your personal and professional life. Now it's easy because it's a part of mine, right? But I'm professionally in this. But you're supposed to be that way too, because you're followers of Christ. Prayer cultivates our dependence on God.

So, what are you trusting God for? There ought to be things in our life that we're praying for, that, unless God does something, nothing is going to change. You'll be in the same situation and with the same people. So, don't be timid; expect an answer.

But what are you trusting God for in your prayers?

I pray in many settings, both personally in the morning and evening and all throughout the day. The staff and the elders pray for your prayer requests that you submit to us online. We pray at elder meetings, at staff meeting. I have a group of three other ministry leaders in Austin that I pray with each month, for each other and for our ministries. But there's a favorite prayer time that I have that we get asked to do. And it really comes from a passage in **James 5**. Let me read it to you: “Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. Is anyone among you ill? Let him call the elders of the church to pray over them

and to anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayers offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.”

In these moments, the elders and pastors are asked to meet with a person going through a difficult situation in their life, maybe a challenging circumstance or a challenging health issue. We listen to their requests, we put olive oil on their head, we lay our hands upon them, and we ask, and we seek, and we knock.

What I enjoy about that prayer time is that we're not timid in our prayers. We expect God to answer. We don't know how He's going to answer. But we expect Him to answer. We know at that moment we have a responsibility to fulfill. This person has come to us in faith and obedience to this passage of Scripture. They need to see God in that situation. They're asking us to pray that God would heal them and that He would reveal His presence in their circumstances. We're not timid in our prayers and that point in time. Our job is to ask and seek and knock, then leave those results to God. But we expect Him to answer. That group time together reminds me constantly how I should pray all the time.

How about you? Have you become timid in your prayers?

It seems most appropriate to end a worship service on prayer with a prayer time, a personal prayer time for you. So, we're going to do that right now. I want you to put into practice asking and seeking and knocking. Maybe you're in a good place spiritually and use the time to thank the Lord and worship Him. Maybe you already know exactly what you need to ask or seek or knock about and continue to be persistent in those prayers. Maybe it's time for you to bring into the light that “thing”—yeah, that thing that you've been hiding or avoiding or enslaved to. It's time to ask for freedom. It's time for release.

I'll come back in a few minutes and close us in prayer and we'll wrap up our time. But take the time, go to your Father, ask, seek, and knock.

[Several minutes of silent prayer time with instrumental music in background.]

[Prayer]

Heavenly Father, we come before Your throne of grace that we might receive grace and mercy in our time of need. Father, would You show Yourself in the lives of the people in front of me and listening to me? Would You help them to not be timid in their prayers, but to ask and to expect You to answer, because you're a loving heavenly Father? We entrust ourselves to You and these prayers to You. May they be a fragrant aroma in Your throne room. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Prayer is an expression of our dependence upon the Father. We can do it often, we can do it regularly. Don't be timid. Expect His to answer. Ask, seek, knock.

Tomorrow we start a new month. For thirty-one days what would you like to be different about your prayer life in August? Let's see.