

The King's Sermon

The Relationships of a Kingdom Citizen – Part II (Matthew 7:7-12)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on August 6, 2017

Introduction

- ❖ **Bumper sticker theology – maybe you've never heard of the term before but you know what it is.** It's where you take a bite-size chunk of Scripture, remove it from its context, and indiscriminately apply it to your life situation or someone else's.
 - ▶ It's when an athlete quotes Philippians 4:13, "*I can do all things through him who strengthens me*", right before he enters the game. Somehow I don't think Paul had football in mind when he wrote that. But the verse sure fits nicely on a bumper.
 - It's when someone tries to comfort a friend going through a difficult season in life with Jeremiah 29:11, "*For I know the plan I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*" That's a great promise – assuming you're one of God's covenant people and assuming you're cool with waiting 70 years in exile before those good plans come to fruition. Something tells me that's not exactly what they had in mind.

- ❖ **Bumper sticker theology sounds great and feels comforting, but when Scripture verses are ripped from their context and applied indiscriminately, we risk giving people false assurances and disillusioning them with God and God's Word.** If you promise me that I can do all things through God who strengthens me, and yet I fail to accomplish my goal, that could leave me confused and questioning, "Where is God when you need him?" But instead of questioning God, maybe we need to question how we interpret and apply God's Word.

- ❖ That's one of our goals in preaching expository sermons (sermons that allow the biblical passage to govern the emphasis and shape of the message). We want to help you, as listeners, to develop as readers of Scripture. To help you properly interpret and apply, especially popular verses that are so easy to memorize apart of their biblical context.
 - ▶ So when we're studying verses in the Sermon on the Mount, we've got to read them – not in isolation – but as a part of a whole sermon. And by now you should know a sermon is not just a lecture where you're given ethical instructions to live by. **A sermon is where the Christian instructions to live by are grounded in and motivated by the Christian gospel.** It's where the imperatives of the Christian life are rooted in the indicatives (the facts) of the Christian gospel regarding the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord.

- ❖ So in this morning's passage, we've got two verses that look great on a bumper sticker. First, you've got v7, "*Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.*" What a promise of answered prayer! Then you've got the Golden Rule in v12, "*Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them*".
 - ▶ These are verses even non-religious people know. They're common and commonly applied. But if you just gave people v7 on a bumper sticker, **they'll probably turn into atheists** after repeated disappointment with unanswered prayers. And if you just gave people v12 without context, **they'll probably turn into moralists** (into scribes and Pharisees) who treat the Golden Rule like an ethical code to live by – failing to realize no one can live out the Golden Rule without grace and without faith.

- ❖ **What we're going to do is to study these verses in the context of a gospel-centered sermon, which is a perfect way to describe the Sermon on the Mount.** We're going to come across three imperatives that touch on our relationship to God and to others. We're called to pray to God with dogged persistence. We're called to pray with child-like confidence. And we're called to love others with selfless consideration.
 - ▶ **I'm going to argue that your position before God and your perception of that relationship is what makes all the difference.** How you see God and how you see yourself in relation to God – which all depends on the gospel – is what determines whether you're going to pray with dogged persistence, pray with child-like confidence, and love other people with selfless consideration.

Pray with Dogged Persistence

- ❖ Let's begin with the call for dogged persistence in the pursuit of God in prayer. I see this in vv7-8, *“⁷Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.”*
 - ▶ All three verbs are in a tense that suggests a continuous action. So Jesus is telling us to *keep* asking, *keep* seeking, *keep* knocking. I don't think there's much to be gained in trying to parse the difference between asking, seeking, or knocking. **I think the emphasis is simply on our persistence in prayer.** We're called to pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17). To be constant in prayer (Rom. 12:12).
- ❖ Now I'm not surprised if you thought these verses on prayer seem to come out of nowhere. Jesus was just talking about taking the plank from your eye before pointing out the speck in another's. And now a few verses on prayer and then the Golden Rule? This chapter doesn't seem to flow as well as chapters 5 or 6. It feels like Matthew threw together a few sayings of Jesus to wrap up the Sermon.
- ❖ **But I'd argue that an emphasis on persistent prayer is totally fitting when you consider the high demands for righteousness laid out for us in the Sermon on the Mount.** Let's do a quick review. In v12 Jesus calls the Golden Rule a good summary of “the Law and the Prophets”, which if you recall he mentioned earlier in chapter 5:17. There his point was that his teaching is not in opposition to the Law and the Prophets but in conjunction.
 - ▶ So everything between chapter 5:17 to chapter 7:12 should be read as a whole. Jesus starts challenging the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees because it only dealt with surface-level conformity to the law. **Their view of righteousness overlooked heart-level trust and obedience to the Lawgiver.**
- ❖ Jesus goes on to teach that if you expect to be in the kingdom of heaven, then your anger must be renounced. Your lust must be mortified. Your marriage vows must be kept. Your integrity must be unquestioned. Your desires for revenge must be extinguished. Your love must be directed towards even your enemies.

- ❖ You must have a private devotional life apart from public view. You must serve God alone and renounce any allegiance to money and the accumulation of it for personal gain. You must not be anxious about your life. And you must not judge others without a clear sense of your own sinfulness. Bottom line, you must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect (5:48).
- ❖ So by the time you get to chapter 7:7, you should be wondering, “Who is sufficient for these things?” Who can enter the kingdom of heaven? **If you seriously consider what it takes to enter the kingdom, you would confess that you don’t have it.** You would see yourself as poor in spirit, as a mere pauper before the High King of Heaven. **If that’s your position before God, then asking, seeking, and knocking on the door – praying unceasingly for God to grant what it takes to enter the kingdom – is a fitting response.**
- ❖ It’s when you fail to see this connection that you begin to interpret vv7-8 as some sort of bumper sticker promise to grant whatever you wish. **Maybe you’ve been praying for certain things to happen in your life.** You’ve been seeking for a certain relationship to work out, for God to grant a you spouse or to start a family. Or you’ve been knocking on doors in your career path, hoping God opens one of them.
 - ▶ And you’re getting discouraged because it does say everyone who asks receives, the one who seeks finds, to the one who knocks it will be opened. **There’s a guarantee, a surety, a direct promise in these verses.** So why hasn’t God answered? Why doesn’t he uphold his promise? Does he not care? Is he even there? Do you see the existential dilemma these verses can create?
- ❖ My point is that only happens if you take them out of context. Jesus is not giving us a blanket promise to grant whatever we ask. **But he is giving us a powerful promise to grant what it takes to enter the kingdom of heaven – if we keep asking.** God is promising to make us kingdom citizens who exhibit kingdom righteousness exceeding the scribes and Pharisees.
 - ▶ **That is a prayer you can be sure God will always answer.** He may not grant you acceptance into that college of your dreams. He may not open up that door in your career path. He may not give you success or give you healing.
 - But if you're asking for the kingdom – if you recognize your spiritual poverty, if you ask him for righteousness, to make you righteous as he is righteous – if you keep asking, it will be given to you. That's a promise you can bank on.
- ❖ Now I realize your prayer life goes beyond just asking for righteousness. You still pray for relationships, for career opportunities, for your children to make wise choices, for the welfare of your aging parents, for the salvation of non-believing family and friends. **Even though there’s no guarantee – no surety that God is going to grant your request – these verses still call you to persist in asking, seeking, and knocking.**
 - ▶ Not with the mindset that if I pray for something enough times, I prove my seriousness or my worthiness to be granted this request. **No, there’s no set number that God is waiting for me to reach before he’s willing to act on my behalf.** And it’s not like I can wear God down if I bug him enough.

- ❖ I know there's that **Parable of the Persistent Widow** (Lk. 18:1-8) where a widow keeps bothering this unjust judge, coming to court every day pleading her case, until he finally gives in and grants her justice. **And I can see how someone might interpret that to mean we're suppose to wear God down until he gives in.**
 - ▶ But Jesus argues differently. He says if this unjust judge with no compassion wears down if you bother him enough – "*and will not God?*" (18:7). Look at what this judge does *and will not God* do abundantly more? A God who is perfectly just and deeply compassionate. It's an argument from the lesser to the greater.
- ❖ Jesus is saying, "Keep praying. Keep seeking. Keep knocking. Go ahead. It doesn't give God a headache. **You persistently asking actually gives him great delight because it gives him great glory.** It demonstrates what you think of him – that he is sovereign, just, and compassionate. That he's the only one who can help. That he's your only hope and stay.
- ❖ **Of course you have to face the possibility that maybe your prayers are not being answered in the way you want because what you want is wrong.** It's for sinful purposes, for selfish gain. That's what James says in James 4:3, "*You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.*"
 - ▶ But let's assume you're praying for good things – things that glorify God and does good to others – **if God has yet to answer, Jesus's instruction is to keep praying, keep seeking, keep knocking on his door.** Go beyond that point where it gets awkward. It won't bother God. It won't annoy him.
- ❖ **Christian, why have you stopped praying?** Why are you thinking about giving up? Don't say it's pointless. Don't say God has heard it enough times. God says, "Keep it coming." I don't know how long it'll take or why it's taking so long. **But I do know that God welcomes you to pray boldly and to pray persistently.** To keep knocking until he answers.

Pray with Child-Like Confidence

- ❖ If you have this right perspective of God, it empowers you to pray with dogged persistence. If we keep reading on in vv9-11, we're going to see how another perspective of God will empower you to pray with child-like confidence.
 - ▶ Look starting in v9, "*⁹Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? ¹¹If 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!*"
- ❖ Here Jesus is arguing again from the lesser to the greater. He gives two examples of how good earthly fathers can be counted on to give good gifts to their children. If a son asks for bread, his father won't give him a stone, and if he asks for a fish, his dad won't give him a serpent. **Experience tells us that good fathers give their children what's good for them.** Now if good earthly fathers (who are inherently evil) give good gifts to their children, then how much more will your good Heavenly Father?

- ❖ That's the key here. **The Fatherhood of God.** Earlier Jesus taught his disciples to address God in prayer as our Father in heaven. **But that's not a privilege for all mankind.** Notice how Jesus casually affirms the doctrine of human depravity. Due to the Fall recorded in Genesis 3, mankind is under a curse. We are born fallen, evil by nature. Even when we do good things, like providing for our children, we're still rightly identified as evil.
 - ▶ That means unregenerate man is no child of God. We are born sinners. Estranged from God. At enmity with him. **You come into this world not with God as your Father but as your enemy.**
 - And yet Scripture leaves us speechless when it says that the Father loves his enemies. He shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, he sent Christ to die for us. While we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son (Rom. 5:8, 10).

- ❖ Behold what manner of love the Father has given to us, that we (sinners evil by nature) should be called the children of God! (1 Jn. 3:1) And so we are because of his mercy, by virtue of a second birth. For those who receive Christ and believe in his name, God has given the right to become children of God (Jn. 1:12).
 - ▶ **And if he is now your Father, it changes your entire approach to prayer, especially dealing with unanswered prayer.** When your heavenly Father says “No” to your prayers, or when he says “Wait” or when he says nothing at all, I know it feels like he’s giving you a stone or serpent, but according to Jesus, his silence is actually a good gift. It’s really bread. It's a fish.
 - It’s for our good. It may not feel like it yet. From our finite perspective his actions (or inaction) might seem cruel, **but in those times when we can't trace his hand, we have to trust his heart** (Charles Spurgeon).

- ❖ I think one of the hardest things to do as a father is to take your toddler for her annual checkup, which usually concludes with a vaccination shot. I remember a few years back having to take my daughter by myself, and when the needle came out all hell broke loose. I literally had to pin her down. The nurse was like a wrestling coach telling me to lock her arms. Put your weight into it!
 - ▶ I'm sure my daughter was thinking her dad has lost it. Why would he hold me down and purposefully let this cruel woman stab me with that needle? But if my little girl could only understand that the prick of a needle (as painful or scary as it may be) pales in comparison to catching polio or the measles.

- ❖ At such a young immature age, she's probably not going to get it. She'll still put up a fight. **But as she matures – as she comes to better understand and trust her father's heart – she'll come to learn that sometimes dads are going to do things we don't understand.** But they're things we trust are good for us. That’s not ignorance. That’s not being childish. That’s being childlike in your faith (cf. Mk. 10:15).

- ❖ I once heard Tim Keller say something like: **You can be sure that God will always give you everything you would ask for if you knew everything he knew.** It takes the humility of a child to admit that you don't.
 - ▶ You don't have God's wisdom. You don't have his omniscience. So keep asking, seeking, and knocking with child-like confidence, trusting that you have an all-good, all-wise, Father in heaven who knows something you don't.
- ❖ Now maybe you grew up with a bad father or an absentee one, so you might have lost those childlike instincts to trust at a very young age. But by adulthood, most of us have lost them anyhow. We grow skeptical towards God and far too impatient. We demand to know exactly what he's thinking and doing in our lives.
 - ▶ **But growing in your faith means to recover those childlike instincts.** It means no matter how long it takes or how discouraged you get – you keep asking, seeking, knocking – trusting him as you would a good Heavenly Father.

Love with Selfless Consideration

- ❖ Now this perception of God as Father is essential if you expect to actually live out the Golden Rule. This leads to our third imperative to love others with selfless consideration.
 - ▶ Now don't look down at your Bible. Answer this in your head. **What's the first word of the Golden Rule?** Are you thinking 'do'? Do unto others. Or maybe the word 'whatever'? Whatever you do or whatever you wish. Okay look down and look at the first word. It's either 'so' or 'therefore'. We ignore it. But it makes all the difference.
- ❖ Have you ever asked why it starts with 'so'? **Without context, the Golden Rule is simply good ethics.** It's a pithy saying you might as well slap on a bumper sticker. **But if you read in context, you realize this Rule follows a word of grace.**
 - ▶ Remember, Jesus just told his disciples that God is your heavenly Father who graciously gives good gifts even though you're evil – *so* (therefore) keep the Golden Rule. Think about it: If I have a Father in heaven who loves me, who takes care of me, who always looks out for my interests – that frees me to start living selflessly, considering the interests of others over my own, loving my neighbors as myself.
- ❖ **Like I said, the Golden Rule on a bumper sticker will produce a bunch of moralists.** But the Golden Rule understood and applied in the context of the Sermon on the Mount – in response to the Father's love most clearly demonstrated through the cross – will produce selfless Christians whose good works give glory to their Father in heaven.
- ❖ **Now it's often pointed out that other world religions and cultures have some form of the Golden Rule.** But outside of the Bible, you'll only find it phrased in the negative. Confucius is quoted to have said, "Do not to others what you would not wish done to yourself". The Stoics had an almost identical saying. In the apocryphal book of Tobit it says, "Do not do to anyone what you yourself would hate."

- ❖ So it's about what you *don't* like, what you *don't* wish for. I don't wish to be robbed so I won't rob you. I don't like being insulted so I won't insult you. That's how it works in the negative. Now some are going to downplay the distinction saying it's all the same in the end.
 - ▶ **But if all you had was a negative form of the Rule, then you could justify yourself so long as you can avoid causing anyone any harm.** You could disengage from everyone. Keep at a distance and avoid any real relationships. Avoid doing others any harm. And you keep the Golden Rule.

- ❖ But the way Jesus frames the Rule in the positive, leaves you no outs. **We're called – to not just avoid doing harm – but to do positive good. To treat others the way you want them to treat you.** Do you like it when people give you a second chance when you mess up? Then be gracious and give second chances to others. Do you like it when people give you the benefit of doubt and don't jump to conclusions? Then be gracious and do the same for them.
 - ▶ If you only keep the Golden Rule in its negative form, then you're only operating in the realm of justice. **But Jesus's Golden Rule moves you beyond strict justice into the vast expanse of grace.** *“So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them”* – that is pure grace. And only those who have experienced grace can give it themselves.

- ❖ Have you experienced God's grace? Have you been converted? Have you received the second birth? Have you repented of your sins and trusted in Christ as your Lord and Savior? If not, then you're not yet a Christian, you're not a child of God and he's not your Father, **so no matter how much you admire the Golden Rule – you will not be able to keep it.**
 - ▶ It was never meant to be indiscriminately applied to all of mankind as an ethical code. It was always meant to be a summary of the Law and Prophets, of the second greatest commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. **That means the Golden Rule (like the rest of God's law) can only be kept by those transformed by the gospel and empowered by the gospel.**

- ❖ So to my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, how do you plan to keep the Golden Rule, even this week – with your coworkers, with your small group, with your family members, with even the stranger on the street or the other drivers stuck in traffic?
 - ▶ Do so – not in your own strength, for your own glory, like you had the Golden Rule on your bumper – but all in the power of the Spirit, secure in the love of the Father, all for the glory of the Son.