

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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ASK AND IT SHALL BE GIVEN TO YOU

Matthew 7:7-11

We saw in our previous lessons that the Lord Jesus teaches us not to judge and not to give holy things to dogs. In those verses, He warns us against judgementalism and against being indiscriminating. Now He makes this wonderful promise in Matthew 7:7-11. This is what Jesus says.

Matthew 7:7. "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.

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!

The context

Before we begin to explore the meaning of this passage, I think we should ask ourselves this question. What is the connection between this passage and what the Lord Jesus has taught before? Why does He make this promise, 'Ask and it shall be given to you,' at this particular point?

Remember that we are still in the Lord's Sermon on the Mount. I will remind you that the Sermon on the Mount teaches us what is our responsibility before God. It describes God's expectation of the Christian in his character, and in his relationship to God and to his fellow men. If you really understand the Lord's teaching and if you are honest with yourself, you will immediately feel an unpleasant sense of hopelessness and helplessness. The sincere Christian, i.e., the believer who truly feels this sense of weakness and inadequacy, this one will come before God and say, 'Lord, how am I going to reach the standard that you expect from us? How can I live the Sermon on the Mount? In my own strength, in my own wisdom, I can't live this kind of life.'

This is the reason why, as the Lord Jesus comes to the end of His Sermon on the Mount, He says, 'Ask and you shall receive. I know you don't have the strength. I know you don't have the power. But trust Me. Ask, and you will have it.'

Now we see the connection! If the Lord Jesus did not say these words at the end of His Sermon, I think we would all be in despair. Because when we look at the standard that the Lord Jesus has set, what else can we feel but a sense of despair? 'I am so selfish. I am so weak. How can I love, Lord, in the way you ask me to love? You require poverty of spirit, purity of heart, truth, compassion, a forgiving spirit, a life of integrity. I lack all these qualities. How can I live a life characterized by

these virtues unless you give me the strength?’ And here at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus gives us the hope and the help that we need.

You must ask

Ask and it shall be given to you. This, of course, is to be understood of asking God in prayer. Now here, we have to talk about an important principle in prayer. There is an aspect of prayer that is conditional: we must make our request known to God. If we want something from Him, we must ask. If we ask, we receive. If we do not ask, we do not receive. If we seek, we find. If we do not seek, we do not find. If we knock, it is opened to us. If we do not knock, it is not opened to us. The apostle James says the thing in these terms.

James 4:2. ...You do not have because you do not ask.

3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.

Sometimes we are impressed by Christians who are very gifted spiritually, who have many talents that they use for the glorification of the church, and we say to ourselves, ‘I wish I had this gift. I wish I had this talent.’ And then, we sigh silently with envy. Has it ever crossed your mind that they have these gifts perhaps because they have asked for them? Has it ever crossed your mind that you can also ask for these gifts? If we ask for something that we are going to consume on our own selfishness and greed, God will not answer the desire of our heart. But if we ask in such a way as to bring glory to God and to His church, we can have the confidence that we will have it.

This is probably the most encouraging passage in the Bible on the subject of prayer. But I wonder how many of us apply it consistently in our lives. You see, we carry within us a great deal of wishes, but they rarely become askings. We wish that this situation would get better, or that we might be able to do this or that, but too often, we don’t make the wish a prayer. We think about our problems, we might share our concerns to those who are close to us, but do we consistently go to our heavenly Father in prayer to talk frankly about what troubles our hearts? Here Jesus opens the doors of faith as widely as they can be opened and declares that the way to receive from the Father is to ask.

In this wonderful sentence of the Lord’s teaching, we see how God’s relationship to us is clearly defined. God says, ‘Ask, you will receive.’ The fact that He gives it to you is an expression of His grace. He freely gives it to you upon the asking. This is God’s part in prayer. On a one side, we see the grace of God that freely gives to those who are in need. And on the other side, there is also our responsibility. This is man’s part in prayer. Our responsibility is to ask, to seek, and to knock. God did not say that He will give us a good thing whether we asked for it or not. God’s grace is freely available, but we have to ask for it.

Persevering in prayer

Notice now the insistence of this asking. In the Greek text, we have three imperatives in the present tense (ask, seek, and knock). They are used in a continuous sense. This means that you don’t just ask once and that’s it. In other words, you keep on asking and you will receive it. You keep on seeking and you will find. You keep on knocking, knocking, knocking until finally the door opens. God is always at home. Don’t walk away. Keep knocking at the door of heaven until it opens. God wants us to persevere in prayer, to pray often and with intensity. What is a persevering prayer? It is being so obsessed with getting something that you never give up until God responds.

So important is this point that the Lord Jesus will illustrate it with several parables. Take for example the parable of the friend at midnight (Luke 11:5-8). The story is about a man who was traveling. It was midnight and he needed some food. So he knocked at the door of a friend’s home and

asked for some bread. His friend was not eager at all to help him because it was very inconvenient. But because of his persistence in asking, he was able to convince his friend to provide some food for him. And Jesus says that God, for whom there is no inconvenient time, is always ready to give to the person who perseveres in prayer.

God's way of thinking is so different from our way of thinking, isn't it? When a child asks for the same thing over and over again, we get annoyed. We say 'no,' but he keeps on making the same request. We feel annoyed by his persistence. But when you come to the Bible, everything is upside down. God's way is not our way. God loves the kind of people who would get on our nerves. He loves the persistent people who never give up. James 1:5 says, *But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men **generously and without reproach**, and it will be given to him.* We think that we are troubling God when we keep asking Him. But James tells us that God gives without reproaching. In other words, He will never say, 'Why do you come back all the time?' Don't be afraid to ask God because He gives generously and without reproach to His children.

Coming to God in full confidence

The assurance of an answer to our prayer is based on the fact that God is our Father. That is why Jesus tells us about a situation in which a child comes to his father with a request. Would you mock him by giving something that looks what he asks but is in fact totally different? *Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent?* Of course not! Parents love their children. They don't give them what is useless (a stone) or a what might be harmful (a snake). They give them good gifts.

And then comes this argument. *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!* This 'how much more' argument is often used in the Bible. It stresses the point that if something is true in this little instance, then how much more so in the larger case. If you who are evil parents (sinful parents) can give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father, who is not evil but perfectly good, give good things to His children when they pray to Him.

What are the good things? In my opinion, the Lord Jesus was referring more to spiritual good things than to temporal good things. Remember that Jesus was teaching about prayer. And prayer in the context of the Sermon on the Mount is that burning pursuit of God and His righteousness. This asking is an asking for the Christian virtues that Jesus has just explained in His sermon. This seeking is a seeking for God. This knocking is a knocking at heaven's throne room. Also, when we compare this passage in Matthew to the parallel passage in Luke, we realize that Jesus had in mind the Holy Spirit.

*Luke 11:13. If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father **give the Holy Spirit** to those who ask Him!*

This doesn't mean that we cannot pray for temporal things. But we should understand that this passage is more a request for the necessities of the spiritual life than for the necessities of the physical life. The request is for daily forgiveness, deliverance from evil, peace, hope, love. We should be bold and diligent in asking for such benefits.

Limitations on God's promise

Does God always answer our prayers? From experience, we know that our requests are not always granted. 'I prayed to have that job, but I didn't get it. I prayed that my children could improve their grades, but so far, nothing has changed. I prayed to be healed from a disease, but I am just getting worse.' When our prayers are not answered, we are tempted to think that prayer doesn't work.

Jesus is not teaching here that whatever I desire, God is going to give to me. It would not be reasonable to believe that the promise ‘Ask and you will have,’ is a universal and unconditional promise. The Bible is not something that works automatically. You press a button and the door opens. It doesn’t work like that. Try to imagine that by your prayer, any wish would be granted and any dream would come true. It would turn prayer into something magical. I am thinking of Aladdin and his magical lamp. Every time he wants something, he just rubs his lamp and a genie pops up and says, ‘Here I am. What do you want me to do for you?’ Obviously that is not the proper way to fellowship with God. It would turn Him into our slave who appears instantly every time we rub our little prayer lamp.

In addition to this, try to think of the impossible pressure that would be on your shoulders if it was certain that you get everything that you ask. Would you have enough confidence in your own wisdom to handle that? If you perceive what is involved, you would never ask God for anything again. Martin Lloyd-Jones in his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount says this.

‘I thank God that He is not prepared to do anything that I may have the chance to ask Him, and I say that as the result of my own past experience. In my past life I, like all others, which at that time I wanted very much and which I believed were the very best things for me. But now, standing at this particular juncture in my life and looking back, I say that I am profoundly grateful to God that He did not grant me certain things for which I asked, and that He shut certain doors in my face.’

Here is a man who understood that human wisdom is too frail to cope with the burden of a universal and unconditional answer to prayer. God only has the wisdom to know fully which gifts are good for us and which are not. If we ask for good things, He gives them. If we ask for things which are not good (and there are many ways in which they may not be good), then He denies them. Only God knows the difference.

Like a traveler

Ask. Seek. Knock. Three simple actions. What do they make you think about? Ask. Seek. Knock. These actions make us think about someone who is on a journey and he is trying to find his way. Consider this. What happens when you are looking for the way to some place? First, you ask for the way to get there. Then, having got the instructions, you look for the road. You seek. And when you have found the place after seeking, what do you do? You knock on the door for admission. This is exactly the order of the words of the Lord Jesus. Ask, seek, knock.

And we find exactly the same order in Matthew 2, when the wise men were looking for Jesus. In Matthew 2:2, it says that they asked the question, *Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?* In v. 9, having asked, they went and sought for Him who is born King. They followed ‘the star which they had seen in the East.’ In v. 11, they found Him. *And they came into the house and saw the Child with Mary His mother.* Of course, you don’t enter a house without first knocking on the door. And so, just as the wise men sought for the Lord Jesus, we too ought to look for Him. We ask, we seek, and we knock that we may find admission into the presence of God.

This leads me to talk about the spiritual experience of God. In this passage, we have what we call a ‘divine passive.’ It says, *Ask and it shall be given to you.* ‘Shall be given’ is of course the passive form. When you see this passive form in this context, ‘It shall be given’ means that God will give. God will do it. So when it says, ‘Knock and it shall be opened,’ it means that God will open it. God is the one who will open the door.

A living experience with God

All this means that when you ask and God answers you, you have a spiritual experience. When you knock and God opens, you have a spiritual experience. You experience something that God has done. Some people ask, 'How can I experience God? How do I enter into the experiences of the new life?' The Lord Jesus is telling us right here. By knocking upon the door. You don't have because you didn't ask. You don't find because you didn't seek. You can't enter because you didn't knock. And therefore the door was not opened to you. God is never going to become real to you unless you ask, you seek, you knock at the door of heaven and you meet with Him. How are you going to meet with a person unless you go, you look for his place, you find his address, you knock at his door and when he opens the door, he invites you to come in?

Here Jesus invites us to come to Him and to meet with Him. 'Come to Me. Just ask the way, look for the way, knock on the door and you are going to meet with Me.' This is how we are going to have a living experience with God. It all started with the asking. And Jesus is very concerned that we shall ask. Why is He so concerned that we should learn to know God in this experiential manner? Because only in this way will your faith be established on the basis of a sure communication with God.

You see, Christians who have no experience of God have to depend on somebody else's experience. Their Christian experience derives from what God did for somebody else. But that is not much of a foundation for spiritual growth. To be a Christian is to be a witness for God in the world. And to be a witness means that you are someone who has experienced what you are talking about.

For example, how can you witness to other people about being born again if you have not experienced what it means to be born anew? If you are the same today as you were before you were a Christian, what does the new birth mean for you? It has no personal meaning for you. You may be able to talk about the theory of the new birth. But you will not be able to talk about the experience of being born again.

This is the difference between someone who talks about God strictly from his knowledge of theology and someone who has met with God and experienced His goodness. People can discern easily whether you are only talking theory or you are talking from your own experience. And you will speak with conviction and power only if you speak about something that you have experienced. You cannot share the word of God with any conviction unless you have proved in your own experience that every word that God says is true.

In closing, I would like to read to you John 16:24 where Jesus repeats what He said in the Sermon on the Mount. He says to His disciples, *Ask, and you will receive, that **your joy may be full.*** When we pray and God answers our prayer, we will experience the joy of receiving from our heavenly Father. Then we know that our God is a living God, that He is truly the God of heaven and earth.