

Series	Sermon on the Mount
Study	Study 15
Topic	Prayer and The Golden Rule
Reference	Matthew 7:7-12
Date	8 July 2020
Speaker	Dr Peter Ng

Welcome back to another episode of the Sermon on the Mount. Today, we're going to be looking at Matthew chapter 7 verses 7-12. There are two topics, one main topic and one mini topic. The main topic is basically about prayer, that most important facet of our spiritual life. Now this passage has been variously misunderstood, and so therefore we are going to take some time to really unpack what this passage really means about prayer and then the other one would be the golden rule. Now the golden rule applies to the question of how we are to love our neighbors. So let's get started.

Let's look at this passage, Jesus is saying,

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.

This is an open invitation. The reason you ask, seek and knock is because verse 8

For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.

There definitely will be an answer. Why wouldn't there be an answer. Verse 9,

9 Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent?

You see, bread can look like a stone and serpent can easily be mistaken for a fish with deadly consequences. He is using the analogy of the father and son relationship. It should be one of a loving response, not one of frustration. Surely, your own father won't play you out. You see the ancient Greeks believed that gods were famously difficult and capricious and could not be trusted even among themselves. They have a myth of a beautiful goddess called Aurora, and she was so beautiful that the god of war, Mars fell in love with her provoking the jealousy of other goddess called Aphrodite. Aphrodite set out to take revenge on the beautiful Aurora and she caused her to fall in love with a number of mortals or humans. Aurora fell hopelessly in love with one of them and married him, a mortal called Tithonus, but it was a problem. She was a goddess and could live forever, and he was mortal and had a limited lifespan. So she begged the chief God Zeus to grant Tithonus, her mortal husband the gift of immortality. Zeus granted her the wish and Tithonus became an immortal, but as years rolled on he grew grayer, older is shriveled to be a shell of a man, but he could never, ever die.

You see Aurora forgot to ask Zeus to give Tithonus the gift of eternal youth as well. Aurora could not stand the sight of her decrepit husband. The gifts have turned into a curse and her desires frustrated and she locked up her decrepit husband in his room until other gods took pity on him and turned him into a Cicada.

You see our heavenly father is not like that of the capricious Greek gods who will frustrate man. Verse 11.

If 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!

See the logic is simple. We're not asking from the neighbor across road. We're asking from our own father in heaven. There's a relationship. There is a covenant. Just as our own heavenly father will definitely not withhold anything good from us, how much more will our heavenly father give us the things that we need. So if God's willingness to answer our prayer is anything like that of our own father's love for us, we shall surely expect him to respond to us in a positive manner. So we must pray. So that's the whole thrust of the passage.

Now in many ways, this simple exaltation to pray by Jesus in these verses has often been misunderstood in so many ways that has caused many of us to either abandon prayer or disbelief this verse, or maybe we have a lukewarm approach to it or we will be praying, not out of passion and belief but out of necessity and guilt. You see, at first glance, if you look at these verses on their own, without the context of the entire Sermon on the Mount, you might be led to believe that this exaltation of praise focus on the utility of prayer, on the power of prayer. How it really works to fulfill all our desires? It's like a satisfaction guarantee kind of assurance to make our dreams come true. Then, when we actually pray fervently as this prayer suggest, we are frustrated because if it doesn't come to pass, we lose confidence and therefore there are quite a few misunderstandings associated with interpretation of this prayer. Let's look at these first.

For some of us who read this passage, prayer is like the proverbial raincoat that hangs in our closet. It's there, we know it's there, it's a good raincoat, but we don't wear it when we go about our daily lives because it is after all the raincoat, only to be used when it rains. When you step out and the clouds are gathering and the storms is beckon around the corner, we instinctively grab our raincoats, we start to pray. When the sunshine, the smooth sailing we leave the raincoat of prayer behind in the closet, is a secret weapon only to be used in emergencies.

Now, why is it that the prayer remains a raincoat? We know it is important, we are commanded to pray, we are committed as disciples of Christ. We know prayer is our only lifeline to our King and yet we do not pray. Perhaps the reason is that we've always operated our lives and done things for ourselves in our own efforts that we really don't feel the need to be dependent on God. We feel we're fine. We've got this Lord, will take care of the small stuff and when we can't cope when it rains we get wet and we'll pray and use the raincoat.

This is an inadequate view of prayer, simply because it leaves God out of the intimate details of our lives for which we are actually dependent on him. In the Lord's Prayer, we are asked to pray for daily bread, not monthly supply or yearly supply. We are asked to pray,

And led us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

Which means, a daily prayer because we're surrounded by principalities and powers beyond our comprehension and ability to withstand. Our lack of prayer simply reveals our lack of dependency on God, because we fail to understand the constant hidden danger or what the devil can do to us. It is like going on in the public today without wearing a mask, you can't see the coronavirus. It is a

nanoparticle. Our behaviour determines our survival. You can see many countries including ours, where people have been obediently wearing mask, obeying the government numbers infected are down, the curve has flattened, but the countries like the United States or Brazil, where the leaders do not believe in mask or don't portray responsible leadership by wearing mask, the numbers are skyrocketing.

If we believe in spiritual danger, we will pray and pray daily and depend on God protecting us. On the other end of the spectrum, there is a whole host of other people who pray all the time, who really emphasize the power of prayer. For them prayer is not a raincoat, it is a vending machine. You just come to God, lay down your requests, like in certain coining to the slot, choose your selection, press the button and God will provide everything you need.

They will take this very verse, ask and it will be given, seek and you will find, knock and it will be open to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and one knocks it will be open. They will say, well, can't you read the plain English. It is very simple. Ask, seek and knock. The focus is on increasing intensity of our prayer.

If you ask likely you don't get, you seek, you pray fervently persistently. If you don't get you knock again, knock on the doors of heaven, it insists God gives you what you want. The way they approach this, it would be as if God is a reluctant God, a stingy old father who would like to see us grovel or beg hard enough and long enough before he will give us what we want. The treasure is, they are all ready to be dispensed, to be deposited into our account. All you have to do is pray hard enough, long enough, persistent enough, so that you will get. For them, the focus is on us. God has this celestial vending machine and you just need the right button, the right coins and the right coin is our faith. If you believe and you demonstrate this by persistence and vigor, in which you pursue your request then you will receive and if you don't have enough faith or enough coins, you get nothing.

So you pray hard and some of us even fast, 40 days, 40 nights, and knock on the doors of heaven. This is Kenneth Copeland who runs a mega church ministry in United States and writes in his book, Laws of Prosperity. Faith is a spiritual force, a spiritual energy, a spiritual power. It is this force of faith, which makes the laws of spirit will function. There are certain laws governing prosperity revealed in God's word. Faith causes them to function.

So you can see in his mind, prayer is basically an exercise on spiritual force. If you have enough spiritual force, which is faith, then you can unlock all the riches that God could provide for you. God is described as that impassive forces that is waiting to be unlocked. Hence prayer depends entirely on you, your faith and your reward is from God.

He has another mega church pastor Creflo Dollar and he writes, when we pray, believing that we have already received that we are praying God has no choice, but to make our prayers come to pass. It is a key to getting results as a Christian.

You see how Creflo Dollar has cost our prayer. If we have that kind of faith that believes as if we have received then God has no choice. The word is no choice, but to answer us. What about some of the preachers who say that if we ask for something and end the prayer with if it is your will, it means you have no faith. Well, in that case, look at Jesus Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. He struggles with God and in the end he says, not my will but thine. Just Jesus lack faith, no. His prayer, the way we exercise our will over God's will, is kind of prayer is not what Jesus meant. This would make God our proverbial servant or genie, you rub the lamp and God is obligated to grant your three

wishes.

This sort of prayer cannot be what Jesus meant. In the Lord's Prayer, he already said thy kingdom done, thy will be done. Hence this prayer ask, seek, knock cannot be for just anything we want. The prayer must align with what God's will is, what he wants. The other things is that the father only gives good things for the son. Would you give your son cocaine instead of milk powder? It would give them a great high, but the trouble is the longterm consequences of addiction. Would you give your 14 year old BMW series, just because he asked for it. No, he can't handle it because it's 14 years of age. He does know it, but you do.

So time after time, we have so many people in church get up and testify how God answered their prayer and the focus is inevitably based on how hard they prayed and how God answered it, but what about the ones whose prayer was not answered? You never get them to testify because if you belong to a church that believes that a prayer of faith unlocks all doors then you will never be allowed to testify if your prayers weren't answered, not only that you wouldn't want to testify because it would mean that we didn't have enough faith. You walk away disappointed and prayer becomes something for those elect few people, the special people with enough faith who are Holy enough like your pastor or people who have sacrificed enough like missionaries, it is not for the ordinary Christian. If you really have something very important to pray over, you ask one of them because you don't have enough faith to unlock the powers of God on your own.

So if that's the case, our enthusiasm for prayer will be directly related to the number of positive answers we receive from God. And if we get answers, we get really excited and prayer would seem like a special formula. Pray this way and long and fast and we unlock the powers. On the other hand, which is more often the case, if we don't get the answers we want then our enthusiasm for prayer begins to cool because although we outwardly profess but our prayerlessness reveals our inward attitude that it is no use. He never really answers the way I wanted to go. Maybe because I don't have enough faith or maybe I'm not good enough or holy enough, or prayed hard enough.

Prayer becomes a spectator sport. We're always watching other people testify or prayer becomes a raincoat only be used when I have no choice as a last resort. As what else is there to lose.

So to summarize, you have people who think prayer is a raincoat to be used only in emergencies and then you've got people who think prayer is a vending machine. If you have the right coin or the right faith in God, then you got people in the middle, most of us, who don't really pray very much because we perhaps believe God is all powerful and he is going to do what he is going to do with or without our help, so why bother or perhaps we prayed before and we were disappointed and didn't get the answers that want it. So God has let us down, we decided in our hearts, we will not openly admit it, but we've decided based on our past experience, we prayed very earnestly and yet God took away our loved one. We prayed for so long, God had an answer and we look at the world today it is unraveling all over the place. There is so much pain and suffering and we decide to either God is asleep. We secretly believe this, but we won't admit it. Or he knows and has some deeper plan, which we kind of understand, but surely it involves a lot of suffering, so my prayers is not going to make much difference, so I will pray but minimally when I remember an unfortunately out of guilt or I forgot to pray, God should be angry, I better pray or if the prayer meeting is coming and if I don't attend something bad will happen if I don't pray.

So I will pray because it is expected, all disciples should pray, but if you ask me honestly, it's going to be boring and hard. It is not going to make much difference in my life or the rest of the world.

Now how do we actually interpret this passage?

We need to look at this passage in the light of the whole sermon of the mount. You can't take it on its own. If we take this part of the sermon as a separate section that guarantees answers to our requests and focuses on the utility of prayer to grant our request then we run into the same problems we've described before. So what we actually have to do is we are to take this prayer in the context of the whole Sermon on the Mount.

Now, what is the Sermon on the Mount about? It is about the true righteousness in the life of the disciple. The disciple is described as blessed when his faith and life is authentic, where both outward behavior and inward spirituality are in total sync and such a description of such a disciple is both beautiful as well as devastating. You know, it is beautiful because we see a vision of humility, total spiritual dependence, meekness, person who is peaceful, merciful and yet courageous, who hunger and thirst for righteousness and willing to suffer and die for it.

We see a vision of disciples who even hate in response to the very people who hurt them, who actually practically love their enemies, who speak with integrity, whose lives are open hands of generosity who live in quiet trust instead of anxiety and grief. It's a dazzling picture of what a true child of God looks like.

On the other hand, this same vision is equally devastating because we're not poor in spirit, we are proud. We hate those who persecute us, we hate even those who are different color to us. We don't even like our fellow church members and we're still nursing the hurts that have been un-righteously dealt to us when we see the vision of what true believer is and when we compare ourselves we are devastated.

We're like the proverbial insect drawn to the light because it dazzles us, but we if you come up close it burns us up. It devastates us because we cannot possibly be that person. How are we going to pray? Thy kingdom come, thy will be done. We're struggling with our own will. We're struggling with our own greed. We're struggling with our anxieties, our issues. What we know in our heads is not coming to our hearts and worse of all, we don't want it. We know it's good for us, but we're helplessly, hopelessly unable and all unwilling for our lives to change and our lives are a mess.

It is in this context that this passage needs to be read that we come to God we see the glory, we see the vision, but we see our own pain and inadequacy and we say to the father that is what I want, I want to be that person. Look, Jesus says in verse 11,

If 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

The misunderstanding is on what Jesus meant by good gifts or good things. You see, you and I have our own understanding of good things. 10 bedroom house in Damansara Heights or house by the beach, great holiday in Europe, but is that what Jesus meant by good things. There was a theologian, a famous theologian called RC Sprawl who once described prayer as **for God's glory and our benefit or our good**. When God created the world in Genesis chapter one, after every stage of creation, he declares it is good. It is good when the thing that he creates functions according to original specification and design. The thing we need to realize is that God's glory and our good are not separate things. We seem to think, if I do something glorify God, help my neighbor, paint his

house, or deliver food to people who have been laid off work in this Covid crisis, once it is done then I can ask something for myself, a new car perhaps.

The trouble is our idea for good thing is different from God's idea of good thing. Yeah surely he can give you \$2 million today or house in Damansara Heights, but it be like drinking salt water because it will make you more thirsty, it will ultimately not satisfy you completely and you will want more and more.

The truth of the matter is God's glory and our good are one and the same thing. We wrongly believe that they're separate, but in reality, they are not. It is because we're made in the image of God, we are made to reflect his glory, designed for it and until we fulfill our God given function we will never be satisfied.

So when we bring food to feed the poor or visit the sick, it glorifies God, it pleases him. It shows the world his love, but at the same time these are the only kinds of things that we do, which are truly good because they bring eternal value to us. Matthew 10:42, Jesus says,

And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward

So the only good thing that will ever make an eternal difference in our lives is to ask the Father to change our hearts, to be that kind of person that blessed disciple who truly reflects him. The Sermon on the Mount is about painting a beautiful glorious picture of what the true disciple is like, not to condemn you, so that we were so enthralled, captivated by this vision that we will ask, we will seek, we'll knock for this to happen in our lives. Prayer is for God's glory and when we see God's glory it becomes our good.

So the next section we're going to look at is the pattern of this verse. There's a theme of persistence. When Jesus says we are to ask, we have to seek, we are to knock and why is that this theme of persistence? This is perhaps best answered by going back in history where we can see a parallel verse, when God dealt with the rebellious nation of Israel, sent them to exile for their sin, he challenges them. Jeremiah 29:11 onwards, famous verse we are all familiar with. God says to them,

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare, not for evil to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

Now, this passage in history was when God dealt with the rebellious nation of Israel, sent them to exile for their sins. He challenges them to repent, to turn back to him and they shouldn't fear him because he's actually God good things in store for them. He doesn't have evil to wish upon them. That exile and destruction from Jerusalem was actually a consequence of their sin, not God's evil desire to frustrate them. It's been God's purposes all along from the covenant of Abraham, Genesis chapter 12, to bless them and give them a future and a hope to give them all good things. However, this vision and hope could only be fulfilled if they turn back from their sin. They have to call on God, pray to him, seek him and seek him with all their hearts.

Now this is precisely the same kind of language and sentiment which Jesus uses when he asks us to pray, ask, seek and knock, we misunderstand the call to ask, seek and knock as a method of prayer to badger a reluctant God to get what we want in life, as if he is a stingy reluctant God, nothing could

be further from the truth. If you're parallel Jesus's words in a Sermon on the Mount w Jeremiah, we realize that the language of ask, seek and knock is simply prayer that authentically reveals an inward desire to seek him above all things in life.

You see ask, seek and knock not equals seek him with all our hearts. It is not near persistence, but the persistence as a reflection of our burning pursuit of God. It is not about words that we use to pray or our performance, it is about our love for him. The fact that we not only ask but more than that we seek and more than that we knock describes persistence, motivation to seek the heart of God. If our hearts are on fire for God then we will not do our prayers as a duty to absolve ourselves of guilt or use it as other attempt to get something for ourselves.

It is only when we are seeking God with all our hearts, for which us can knock his outward evidence of what is inside us that when he will respond. He will respond with his plans for our welfare, not for evil to give us a future and a hope, it is his plans not our plans. You see, the only person blocking the full execution of his plans, blocking the good things is actually us. You see, he have hopes for joy in our lives, but we deprive ourselves of hope when we do not pray.

There was a famous theologian called RA Torrey and he writes in his book.

We are too busy to pray, and so we are too busy to have power. We have a great deal of activity, but we accomplish little, many services but few conversions, much machinery but few results. The power of prayer is lacking in our lives and in our work we have not because we ask not.

Now let's look at the last issue coming up from this passage. Some people will look at this passage and naturally ask the question, is prayer so powerful that we can actually literally change the mind of God and if we can actually change the mind of sovereign God can he still be sovereign? Are we really persistent and urgent to ask and seek and knock, will that change the mind of a sovereign God? And I think the best example is in Deuteronomy chapter 9 when Israel were waiting for Moses to descend from Mount Sinai committed the dreaded sin of idolatry, they started worshiping the golden calf in Deuteronomy 9:14 God says,

Let me alone that I may destroy them and blot their name from under heaven. And I will make you a nation mightier and greater than they.

This is the express will of God to destroy the nation of Israel and start all over again and use, instead of Abraham use Moses as a forefather of a new nation. Now Moses responded in horror in Deuteronomy chapter 9:25

So I lay prostrate before the Lord or these 40 days and 40 nights, because the Lord said he would destroy you. And I prayed to the Lord, 'O Lord God, do not destroy your people and your heritage.

This is exactly the kind of behavior as described by Jesus. Ask, seek and knock. This is the same kind of behavior. Urgent, persistent, relentless that Jesus is speaking off and the result is God relented. He didn't destroy Israel. Did God change his mind because of Moses prayer? You see in the Lord's Prayer, he tells us to pray. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done and on this part of sermon he tells us to ask, seek and knock. This tells us that God brings about his divine purposes all over the world through the prayers of his saints.

Now we can see in retrospect it was God's plan all along, not to destroy Israel, although their sin was

so grievous that it didn't warrant their total destruction but God used Moses to pray to save them and God responded to that prayer. What if Moses did not pray? Our prayerlessness does not thwart God's plans the world, but it deprives us of partnership with him in this great work of bringing about the kingdom of God into this world.

Let me conclude here with the words of Archbishop Francois Fenelon, who lived in 1651 to 1715

Tell God all that is in your heart, as one unloads one's heart, its pleasures and its pains, to a dear friend. Tell Him your troubles, that He may comfort you; tell Him your joys, that He may sober them; tell Him your longings, that He may purify them; tell Him your dislikes, that He may help you conquer them; talk to Him of your temptations, that He may shield you from them: show Him the wounds of your heart, that He may heal them; lay bare your indifference to good, your depraved tastes for evil, your instability... Tell Him how self-love makes you unjust to others, how vanity tempts you to be insincere, how pride disguises you to yourself and others.

If you thus pour out all your weaknesses, needs, troubles, there will be no lack of what to say. You will never exhaust the subject. It is continually being renewed. People who have no secrets from each other never want for subjects of conversation. They do not weigh their words, for there is nothing to be held back; neither do they seek for something to say. They talk out of the abundance of the heart, without consideration they say just what they think. Blessed are they who attain to such familiar, unreserved intercourse with God!

Now in this last section we come to deal with what famously called the Golden Rule, Matthew 7:12

So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

It is amazing that all the way across in ancient China, before the birth of Christ, that philosopher Confucius had a similar saying. Do not to others, what you would not wish done to yourself.

The ancient Greeks specifically, the Stoics had a similar saying 20 years before the birth of Christ and 20 BC rabbi Hillel, famous Jewish rabbi was asked by disciple to teach him the whole law while standing on one leg, which means he didn't want a long sermon, he wanted a summary of the whole law and Rabbi said, what is hateful to you do not do to anyone else. **That is the whole law; all the rest is only commentary.** However all these teachings fall short of love because they always emphasize the negative. We do not do things to hurt others and ignore as much God's much higher standard or that we have to love others as ourselves and love is not avoiding hurtful actions towards others, it includes doing something positive. Let me illustrate.

Some time ago, a woman from France called Karine Gombeau was visiting New York city in April 2014 and doing some sightseeing. She stopped by a famous pizza place. She was walking out of the shop when she saw a homeless man. This man had been ignored by thousands of people walking up and down the street as he was invisible to their eyes. Karine reached out to help. She wanted to give him some money, but her wallet was empty. She only had a debit card. So she gave him the only thing she had in her hand, a leftover pizza. She apologized, it was cold, but it was still delicious. And the homeless man took it and ate it. And she was glad that he did not have to eat out of the garbage can that day.

The next day, she was surprised to see her own picture in the newspaper giving pizza to the

homeless man. It turned out that homeless man was not really homeless, he was the movie star, Richard Gere was pretending to be a homeless man in preparation for his getting in character for his role in his upcoming film called Time out of Mind.

You see for thousands of people passing Richard Gere that day, they were practicing what Confucius or Rabbi Hillel said, they did no evil to him. They did not kick him or spit on him. They thought that this was their picture of righteousness in their eyes, in the eyes of society, but what Jesus desires in our lives is more than that. He desired what Karine Gombeau did that day. She gave her food to feed someone, something positive and that would be precisely what she would have wanted others to do to her if she was homeless and hungry.

You see the law and the prophets that's the whole Old Testament, it doesn't record any laborious detail. How one should love one's neighbor simply because you can't cover every single possible detail in life. The law cannot anticipate giving pizza to homeless people in the streets of New York or Kuala Lumpur thousands of years later on. God gives us principles and the Golden Rule is a principle that guides us in expressing how we should practically love our neighbor. If you're homeless and hungry, would you want someone to feed you? Someone always believed that the recipients of generosity have to deserve our love. If they're on the streets because of their stupidity or greed or evil acts, then they don't deserve our help but place yourself in their place.

If we made mistakes in our lives, we have gambled our money away or abandoned our family or had cancer simply because we smoke like a chimney, it is our fault. Wouldn't we still want others to look at us mercifully and treat us with generosity. You see Karine Gombeau giving her leftover pizza to movie star, Richard Gere, someone she admired and a lot wealthier than herself. You see on judgment day Jesus will say to us in Matthew 25 verse 35.

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.

When you hear that when Jesus say that to us or will Confucius say to us, do not to others what you would not wish done to yourself. When we walked away, when we didn't love our neighbor.