

 **Main Street**  
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



**Matthew 7:7-12**  
**“Pressing Into The Promises”**

June 14, 2015  
(3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday After Pentecost)

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**“Following Christ From City Center!”**

**IIIC'2: MATTHEW 7:7-12**  
**"PRESSING INTO THE PROMISES"**

**Leviticus 19:17-18:**

"You shall not hate your brother in your heart,  
*but* you shall reason with your neighbor,  
 lest you bear sin because of him.

You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people,  
*but* you shall love your neighbor as yourself:  
 I am the Lord."

**Further Example Of Higher Righteousness, 5:20**  
**Judgmental Pharisees (9:1, 12:2, 15:1-2), Integrity Gap (23:2-4)**  
**How To Implement 7:1-6 = Pray For Wisdom/Love, Ask/Give (5x: vv.7, 8, 9, 10, 11)**

**2) 7:7-12 RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD IN PRAYER, WITH OTHERS IN LOVE.**

Q\*/Lk. 11:9-10

*Keep On Asking, Seeking, Knocking (Beggar's Wisdom)*

7:1-6 = What Not To Do, 7:7-11 What To Do To Gain Wisdom

**Active Prayer**

**a) vv.7-8 Command + Reason: Ask, Seek, Knock (Prayer Metaphors For Wisdom).**

				Lack (Ask), Something Needed/Lost (Seek), Outside (Knock)
7	1	"Ask,	and it will <i>be</i> given you;	Exhortation (3) + Reason (3), Lord's Prayer: Provisions! 6:10
	2	seek,	and you will find;	p.v. + a.v.+ p.v., Continuous Present Tense, Seek Kingdom 6:33
	3	knock,	and it will <i>be</i> opened to you.	p.v. = <i>by God</i>
				Prayer Language, Jer 29:12-14, Is. 55:6, 65:1, James 1:5, <i>b. Megillah</i> 12b
8	1'	<u>For</u> every one who asks	receives,	Universal Promise, Seeking Divine Wisdom, Quest + Answer To Discern
	2'	and he who seeks	finds,	All 6 Sentences Of Lord's Prayer = Petitions = Prayer As Asking
	3'	and to him who knocks,	it will <i>be</i> opened.	26:39 (thy will) As Caveat, Lev. 29:13
				Typical Of Prayers For Wisdom: Prov. 8:17, Wisd. Sol. 6:12, James 1:5
				<b>Humble Recipients Before Generous Father, Not All Prayers Get A Yes: Also No, Not Yet, Later, It Depends</b>

**Why Bother To Pray? Because God Uses Our Active Seeking To Shape And Use Us**

**b) vv.9-10 Two Rhetorical Questions Based On Look Alikes: Parables.** Q//Lk. 11:11-13

				//6:25-26, 31-33, God Is Not An Abusive Parent
9	1	Or what man of you,		Direct Address, Lk. <i>father</i> , Stone As Inedible
		if his son asks him for bread,		4:3 Temptation, Lord's Prayer Petition For <i>daily bread</i>
	Q1	2 will give him a stone?	(No one)	Round And Smooth Like A Loaf
				Lk. Has <i>Fish/Egg</i> , Not <i>Bread/Fish</i>
	1'			Bread/Fish Palestinian Staples
10	Q2	Or if he asks for a fish,		Not Cause A Child To Break Jewish Laws
	2'	will give him a serpent?	(No one)	Eel Unclean, Lev. 11:29-31
				Eel Edible But Impious
				Follow Christ, Seek Kingdom, All Goods Provided

**b') v.11 Answer To "You Who Are Evil" As A Question.**

God's Generosity

				= <i>Cheap, Evil</i> By Comparison With God Who Only Gives Good
11	1	<i>If you then, who are evil,</i>		Direct Address, Jesus Assumes The Corruption Of All //7:5a, Jesus Excluded
	2	know how to give good gifts to your children,		Lk. 11:13 <i>Holy Spirit</i> , Natural Affection
				Never Gives Bad! Count On God's Benevolent Sustenance
	A/Q3	1' how much more will your Father who is in heaven		Inference, Take Heart! <i>Lesser To Greater</i>
	2'	give good things to those who ask him!?		Reverses v.7, Mt. <i>good things</i> , Lk. <i>Holy Spirit</i>
				Loving God Responds, Live Out Of Overflow

**Active Love**

Strong Doctrine Of Grace. What We Get, We Give: Ethical Application v.12

**a') v.12 Command + Reason: Golden Rule (18<sup>th</sup> Century Title).**

Q//Lk. 6:31

				Tobit 4:15 (-), Ecclesiasticus 31:15, Requires Imagination
12a	1	<u>So whatever</u> you wish that men		Wise Guide, Universal Conclusion <i>So</i> , Inclusion With 5:17, "Law and prophets
	2	would do		Assumes Self Regard, In Jesus The Form Is Positive, Take Initiative!, (-) Didache 1:12
	3	to you,		<i>b. Sabbat</i> 31a, Jewish/Pagan Tradition Of Summaries Of Moral Codes
	2'	do so		Passive Justice? Active Kindness? Life Of Active Love = Kingdom
	1'	to them;		Our Lives Are To Reflect God's Behavior In 7:7-11, Selfish Reversal In Tos. Meg. 4:16
				The Main Thing, We Are To Do For Others As We Ask, Seek, Knock
b		<u>for</u> this is the law and the prophets.		v.12b (M), Not Novel, Inclusion With 5:17, "Law and prophets"
				Rabbinic Summary Of God's Intent, 19:19, 22:34-40, Rom. 13:8-10, Gal. 5:14
				When Judging And Discerning, Do It All In The Spirit Of The Golden Rule, This Is God's Best Gift
				Judge Rightly With Discernment, Pray For Wisdom, Use Golden Rule: Epistle Of Aristeeas 207

**A Brief Treatment Of Matthew 7:7-12**

This thought unit stands in parallel to its predecessor (7:1-6) as the second of two panels that share the basic structure of commands and reasons at the frames (a//a'), and question and answers at the center (b//b'). Whereas 7:1-6 addressed the issue of charitable and true judgments, and God's response when we are not, 7:7-12 deals with the theological issue of the generous God who must be pursued and how God's generosity is to make us generous. The theological and ethical are woven together since the command is to love God to the full and the neighbor as the self. The structure of 7:1-6 is a 4:2 concentric pattern (a-b // b'-a') which opens and closes with a command + reason (a. vv.7-8, "Ask... For" // a' v.12, "So... for"). At the center (b //b') are two questions based on *look-alikes*, followed by an observation (vv.11a), then an answer in the form of a question about human fathers (v.11b) using an argument from lesser to greater. The word *ask* is used five times (vv. 7, 8, 9, 10, 11) to tie the unit together. A universalizing note at the beginning and end (a. v.8, "For *everyone*" // a' v.12a, "So *whatever*") is also notable.

As for sources, everything in 7:7-12 has a parallel in Luke, so the source is Q, a hypothetical source that preceded both and which each used independently. The three commands of v.7 (*Ask... see... knock*) and the three reasons of v.8 are nearly identical to Lk. 1:9-10. It's a bit more complex in b//b': Mt. 7:9-11 // Lk. 11:11-13. Both exhibit the same underlying structure in which two parallel questions about cruelty with good are then answered in an observation about human nature and an answer in the form of another question. It appears Matthew's *man* (v.9a) is more original than Luke's *father* (11:7a) which has been conformed to his subsequent reference to the *heavenly Father* (11:13). What is implied in Matthew's *man/son* is made explicit in Luke's *father/son*. Luke's analogies of *fish/serpent* and *egg/scorpion* are likely more original since both are noxious animal look-alikes, whereas in Matthew the first comparison is inanimate (*bread/stone*) and the second animate (*fish/serpent*) with Luke's *egg/scorpion* absent. Matthew's order of *bread + fish* follows the order of the feeding of the five thousand (Mt. 14:17) and four thousand (Mt. 15:34). His image of *bread/stone* is echoed in Jesus' temptation (4:3). To deceive in order to hurt is devilish. Luke's *give the Holy Spirit* is secondary to Matthew's *give good things* as it specifies one of the things God gives and fits Luke's emphasis on the Spirit (i.e. Pentecost, Acts 2:1-21). That the so called *golden rule* is found in different contexts in Matthew and Luke indicates Matthew brings it in (as in 7:6) to formally conclude the unit. This is clear from the formula he introduces (*So whatever*) and the summary statement (*for this is the law and the prophets*) as an echo of 5:17 and a major structural clue.

The previous unit (7:1-6) raised a question: When are we to judge and when not? Doesn't that take wisdom? Yes, and the path to discernment is by *asking* and *seeking* and *knocking* on God's door. The language is that of prayer for wisdom so Jesus' teaching can be applied in every-new settings. If v.7 is an invitation, v.8 is the attached promise. The use of the reverential passive (e.g. *be given*) in vv.7a, c, 8c indicates divine activity. It is the God who gives and lets himself be found that opens locked doors for entry into the throne room of wisdom. To make his point on God's generous character, Jesus asks two questions which made sense because a desert stone resembles a round loaf of bread and because there were eels in the waters of the Galilee as well as fish. To deceive a hungry child is cruel, and not only is God not cruel, the father delights to give only good gifts. The thought unit rounds off with an ethical application of a well-known rule of thumb in both Jewish and Greco-Roman traditions. We act to others as we wish them to act towards us. We share with others the good things we've received. When we become conduits for God's generosity in a needy world, we fulfill the dream *of the law and the prophets*.

## PRESSING INTO THE PROMISES

*“If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts....”*

We are all, Jesus excepted, a mixed bag of good and evil desires.

M A T T H E W 7 : 1 1 a

**A**rnold Palmer once played a series of exhibition matches in Saudi Arabia. The king was so impressed he proposed, in good Middle Eastern fashion, to honor his guest with a gift. Palmer resisted, "It really isn't necessary, Your Highness. I'm honored to have been invited."

And, in good Middle Eastern fashion, his highness persisted, "I would be deeply upset," replied the king, "if you would not allow me to give you a gift."

Palmer thought for a moment, "All right. How about a golf club? That would be a beautiful memento of my visit to your country."

The next day, delivered to Palmer's hotel, was the title to a golf club. Thousands of acres, trees, lakes, clubhouse, and so forth."

The preacher from whom I borrowed the story added a punch line, "In the presence of a king, don't ask for small gifts!"<sup>1</sup> In an sermon on prayer, Phillips Brooks wrote, "You cannot think a prayer so large that God, in answering it, will not wish you had made it larger. Pray not for crutches but for wings!"<sup>2</sup>

Prayer is the messy, unpredictable, living laboratory of the Christian life. It is give and take interaction with the God whose character is sure but whose paths are rarely predictable. Prayer is not the abstraction of a lecture but the experimentation of a laboratory. Prayer is involvement with God and original research in the dynamics of the kingdom of God. Over the entrance to The Jesus School of Prayer a warning is posted, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For every one...." Prayer is an ongoing dialog with the

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<sup>1</sup> Edited from Brennan Manning, *Lion and Lamb: The Relentless Tenderness of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1986), 165.

<sup>2</sup> *Leadership*, Vol. 12, No. 3.

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inter-personal mystery of the Triune God, and the deeper we move into prayer the more challenging it becomes. Questions arise, questions like: Am I willing to become the answer for which I pray? Do I want to be transformed by the fire of divine love?

There is a story from the fourth century desert monks of Egypt:

“Abba Lot came to Abba Joseph and said: ‘Father, according as I am able, I keep my little rule, and my little fast, my prayer, meditation and contemplative silence; and, according as I am able, I strive to cleanse my heart of thoughts: now what more should I do?’

The elder rose up in reply and stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire. He said: Why not be changed into fire?”<sup>3</sup>

There was a time when my prayers were small, when I tried to figure out what God might be willing to accomplish before I prayed. A little of this, a little of that, then a small, carefully controlled petition that might be easy for God to answer. What a pitiful view of the greatness of God! It is not what we preachers preach but what we are willing to pray for that is the better test of our view of God’s character. I pray more boldly now, even foolishly at times, for healing and all sorts of miracles, and sometimes the most amazing things happen. Not just the safe *O God please guide the hand of the doctor* prayers— good as those may be— but for God to do what goes beyond the best science has to deliver. John Wimber wrote, “My responsibility is to pray, God's responsibility is to heal. If he chooses not to do so, then he's responsible for that.”<sup>4</sup> Puny God, piously prayers. Little God, lilliputian prayers. Big God, bold prayers My advice is pray boldly within the bounds of Scripture. Listen as you pray for fresh ideas and illuminations. Then watch for answers like *Yes* and *No* and *Later* and *Wait and See* and *It All Depends* and *Trust Me*. And what you learn, tell others.

Thursday a week ago we had an older African American woman come late for the food bank, and to watch her walk revealed she was in pain, especially when moving up the small incline. Bent at the waist and shuffling along in short steps. After we got her a bag of groceries, we asked, “Can we pray with you?”

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions Books, 1960), 50.

<sup>4</sup> PreachingToday.com search under Matthew 7:7-12.

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She was eager to take us up, so Lee, Kathy, and I took her out of the hallway and into the library where we pulled at a chair for her to sit it. We carried out a brief interview as to where the pain was and how long she'd had it. Back and legs, and she's just gotten out of the hospital for congestive heart failure. We then explained how we would pray and that we wanted her just to be a sponge and be aware of what might be happening, not to prayer herself since she was receiving prayer.

With permission Kathy and I placed our hands on her shoulders, and Lee placed her hand gently on the woman's knee. I then thanked the Father for his nearness and invited the Holy Spirit to guide our prayers. I prayed brief and directly for the pain she identified to go in Jesus name. Kathy and Lee both prayed as they were led, then me again. Then we stopped for a brief interview since she's the expert in her condition, not us. She told us the pain was much reduced, and then— without our asking— stood up and starting moving her neck around and rotating her torso without discomfort. With each movement grew happier till she was bubbling.

My first skeptical thought was that his was a show to please the folk who'd just given her food, but she gave a credible, heartfelt testimony about relief. She was a simple woman; there was no sense of deception. So we decided to enter a second round of prayer to see if the pain would go altogether, only this time with fresh confidence. After a few minutes, we stopped again for an interview, and when I asked for a score of zero to five, she said *Zero*. She then, to our surprise, stood up with a smile on her face and bent over reaching for her toes and then did a little dance. I was astounded. And when she left with my instructions to tell her pastor what happened, I called a private de-brief with Lee and Kathy. "What just happened?" I asked. We reviewed her initial presentation and obvious discomfort and contrasted it with how she left, which was joyful and without pain. Lee smiled, "I think we got one!" Kathy added, "That was amazing!" I said, "But with people we love fighting for their lives against cancer, how do we tell them God just touched an older woman who hobbled in and walked out? Why something small and not something big? I then thought, 'It was not small for her!'" Whether it was Kathy or Lee, one of them said, "Why don't we just let it be what it is? A good gift," and on that we agreed. As Jesus encouraged us, "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts (plural) to your children, *how much more* will your Father who is in heaven give good things (plural) to those who ask him?" What he gives we receive, and when not much comes our way, we keep asking and seeking and knocking.

Five times in this passage Jesus uses the word *ask*, which in our day would be

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labeled *assertiveness*. Know what you want and ask for it. Not silence but speaking, not waiting but asking. Jesus' brother James was clear, "You have not," he said, "because you ask not."<sup>5</sup> God delights in our asking because it demonstrates trust. All six sentences of the Lord's Prayer are petitions asking God to do something: honor your name, bring your kingdom, do your will, give us bread for life, grant us forgiveness, keep the devil off our backs! Jesus gave us a word track to practice the art of asking. If you don't ask, you don't give God a chance to answer and an opportunity to sift your requests because God only gives *good things*.

It is— when you think of it— an application of the Golden Rule. Since I want people to respond to my needs with bold and persistent prayers of faith, I should do the same for them, as Jesus instructed, "So whatever you wish that men and women would do for you, do so to them." This is why poor people should pray for provision for other poor people and sick people should pray for other sick people and why addicts should pray for other addicts and those with broken marriages pray for those with unhappy homes. You give away to others what you want for yourself because that's the upside-down logic of the kingdom of God. And frankly, it's sometimes easier to have faith for others than for yourself! Alexander MacLaren wrote:

"We may have as much of God as we will. Christ puts the key of the treasure-chamber into our hand, and bids us take all that we want. If a man is admitted into the... vault of a bank, and told to help himself, and comes out with one cent, whose fault is it that he is poor? Whose fault is it that Christian people generally have such scanty portions of the free riches of God?"<sup>6</sup>

Just how much of God do you want? Are you willing to go with the changes that more of God means? And if you want more, then you must learn, said Jesus, to *keep on* asking and *keep on* seeking and *keep on* knocking and not to be satisfied with the status quo. To pray is to change because it invites God into every situation, especially the smallest, as George McDonald wrote, "Anything large enough for a wish to light upon is large enough to hang a prayer on."<sup>7</sup> There is nothing too little

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<sup>5</sup> James 4:2.

<sup>6</sup> PreachingToday.com search under Matthew 7:7-12.

<sup>7</sup> Idem.

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not to pray about; after all, everything in our lives is small to God. God is not too busy with the big stuff to tend to your little stuff, your daily worries and cares. The God who made all of life wants to be invited back into every part. C.H. Spurgeon used the image of a church bell to encourage boldness in prayer:

“Prayer pulls the rope below and the great bell rings above in the ears of God. Some scarcely stir the bell, for they pray so languidly. Others give but an occasional pluck at the rope. But he who wins with heaven is the man who grasps the rope boldly and pulls continuously, with all his might.”<sup>8</sup>

Jesus dares us to test God in this matter. It’s why the Greek tenses of the verbs in verses 7 and 8 all indicate continuous action, “*Keep on asking... keep on seeking... keep on knocking,*” then a universal invitation, “For every one....” Prayer is aerobic exercise that increases our capacity to run with God and not quit.

### TURNING TO THE TEXT

#### a) vv.7-8 An Invitation To God’s Wisdom.

When I took the time to explore the cultural origins of verses 7 through 8, I discovered they were from the world of beggars, who were common in that day.<sup>9</sup> Jesus used the example of beggars to teach his followers about prayer. You see, beggars can’t afford to be proud. If you lack, you ask. If you’re lost, you seek. If you’re outside and resources inside, you knock on closed doors. Need drives you forward. Unless you see yourself as not having what you need and God having everything you need, you’ll never learn to pray. Praying is a posture of humility that makes beggars of us all. Nothing to offer and needing everything. It’s not a picture of American success and isolated self-sufficiency. Honest prayer kills pride.

The vocabulary Jesus used was conventional in the sense that it was common

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<sup>8</sup> Idem.

<sup>9</sup> M. Eugene Boring, *The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. III: The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1995), 212-213.

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Jewish terminology for prayer: asking, seeking, and knocking.<sup>10</sup> And while the images are three, they are all about the same thing, “For *every one* who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will *be opened*.” The passive voice is a pious Jewish way of referring to God without calling the divine name. It will be given *by God*, for every one who asks receives *from God*. Jesus invites his disciples into experiment with God. They are to do business with the One he is in constant communication with; they are invited into an ongoing divine conversation between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Now the question is: Is this a blank check from God? Is it, Ask, seek, and knock for *whatever*, and *whatever* will be given? No, because the language Jesus used is also *wisdom* language. The previous six verses spoke about when not to judge and when to judge, and to know the difference requires wisdom which God gives to those who ask and seek and knock. Jesus’ brother James preserved the same teaching in his letter. Hear the echoes:

“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives to all men generously and without reproaching, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways, will receive anything from the Lord.”<sup>11</sup>

Wisdom, you see, is a step beyond knowledge. Knowledge is *know that*; wisdom is *know how* and *know when* and *know why* because God has worked it into your character over time. What is sought and given, what is lost and found, what is knocked for and then opened from within is God’s wisdom, which can also be defined as the way the Holy Spirit applies Scriptural truth to ever-changing situations.

What we are after is practical divine revelation that comes in conversation with

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount* (Columbia, SC: USC Press, 2004), 134-135.

<sup>11</sup> James 1:5-7.

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God.<sup>12</sup> Knowing Scripture is a first step, but it alone is not enough. I know fools who quote the Bible. What they don't have is wisdom which directs us as to how to apply the truth in love. We interact with God in the Book and in prayer, and as we stick with the means of grace, wisdom comes. We know what to do. We learn to hear from God in written revelation and in answers to prayer. If you ask of a Scriptural text, How does this apply to my life? God will answer. We build a track record with God, and because we do it together in community, we are generally safe from going off on some private tangent. Beyond the stuff God provides, there is the wisdom God offers. Nothing is more valuable than the wisdom of God. Jesus encouraged us to pursue it with all our might. "Go for it!" he said, "then watch what happens."

**b) vv.9-11 The Generous Character Of The Father.**

In a book *Connecting*, Dr. Larry Crabb writes:

"A friend of mine was raised in an angry family. Mealtimes were either silent or sarcastically noisy. Down the street was an old-fashioned house with a big porch where a happy family lived. My friend told me that when he was about ten, he began excusing himself from his dinner table as soon as he could without being yelled at, and walking to the old-fashioned house down the street. If he arrived during dinnertime, he would crawl under the porch and just sit there, listening to the sounds of laughter.

When he told me this story, I asked him to imagine what it would have been like if the father in the house somehow knew he was huddled beneath the porch and sent his son to invite him in. I asked him to envision what it would have meant to him to accept the invitation, to sit at the table, to accidentally spill his glass of water, and hear the father roar with delight, 'Get him more water! And a dry shirt! I want him to enjoy the meal!'"

Crabb goes on to say, "We need to hear the Father laugh." And this great line,

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<sup>12</sup> On the limits of conversation as a window into prayer, see Rodney Reeves, "No, Prayer Isn't Really a Conversation," [www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/june-web-only/no-prayer-isnt-really-conversation.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/june-web-only/no-prayer-isnt-really-conversation.html)

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**Matthew 7:7-12** ..... **11**

“Change depends on experiencing the character of God.”<sup>13</sup> When we meet God’s love, we are changed. What Crabb was doing in his conversation was based on what Jesus does in verses 9 through 11, which is to clarify the character of God against the distortions of earthly parents. God is not cruel Father; God is a good father and more!

There is no more important issue than the character of God. Is the God of whom we speak approachable? Is God generous and kind and just and wise and forgiving? Will God listen as I fumble my way through an awkward prayer? The most basic Christian affirmation is that God the Father is like Jesus the Son, or in simpler terms, that Jesus is *the spittin’ image* of his Father. Jesus comes to represent the interests of his Father, and that he does by the power of the Holy Spirit. It’s a Trinitarian thing. Want to know how God feels about things? Then look at Jesus.

The form of Jesus’ argumentation in verses 9 through 11 is worth following. He reasons from *below to above* and from *the lesser to the greater* using analogies from family life. What this means at a minimum is that Jesus believed glimpses of God were hidden in human experience, and that if he highlighted them it would be a bridge to accurate thinking about God, in this case the care of a father.

“Or what man of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone?” A round loaf and a rounded stone look alike; the one will fill your belly and the other break your teeth. Tricking a hungry child is cruelty, and this is not what God does. God is not a cosmic sadist. The one who created us needing food delights to meet the need. No parent should mock the trust of a child, and God does not mock the needs of those who ask.

The second image of the fish and the serpent works on the same principle of two different things that look alike. There is a species of eel in the Sea of Galilee that resembles a species of fish, but the fish is ritually pure for Jews to eat, while the eel is not. What Jewish father would cause his child to violate one of the kosher food laws? Only a cruel one who treated his child as a pagan, and that is not who the heavenly Father is. God the Father answers prayers in ways that keep his people loyal. Only a monster would do otherwise, and God is not such. In the kindness and wisdom of a strong earthly father, we catch glimpses of God’s character. Same in the tenderness and fierce protection of an earthly mother. Both are windows into God.

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<sup>13</sup> Waco, TX: Word, 1997.

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We may be adults before others, but before God we are always children.

Not all children have such parents. In Ramsey County, Minnesota, ninth and tenth graders were asked a question: "What comes to mind when you think of the word *dad*?" Answers came quickly. One end of the spectrum said, "I think of the word *jerk*." Others thought of the words angry, mad, and absent. On the other hand, some said, "I think of wholeness, kindness, security, safety." Whatever end of the spectrum, *Dad* is an immensely powerful word.<sup>14</sup> The goal of Christian fathers and mothers is to make it as easy as possible for children to trust their heavenly Father and see the continuities of character. Parents either build or burn the bridges over which their children walk towards God. At times I say to a broken person, "If I was your Father, this is what I would say to you."

It was then in verse 11 that Jesus made an extraordinary statement about human nature. This is what he thinks of us, "If you then, *who are evil*, know how to give *good* gifts to your children..." To his closest followers, many if not most of whom were parents, Jesus voiced the unpleasant truth about who they were. Compared to him, they were evil. It was spoken with the same clinical accuracy as an oncologist who looks at the scans and says to a patient, "You have cancer." As a group he referred to them as *you who are evil*, which could also mean *you who are cheap*.<sup>15</sup> He said it because he loved them and because they needed to hear the truth; he wanted there to be no naivete about their dark capacities. But Jesus is in a different category. We never hear from his lips any consciousness of personal sin. He speaks of the sin and evil of others, never of himself, and the church's reasoning is that he alone was *without sin*. Evil had no attachment place in him. He was one of us and yet pure of heart. He shares our mortal and frail humanity but not our systemic disease of rebellion against God and partnership with the Evil One. We can be infested and colonized by evil desires— even by demons— but not Jesus. He was not infected with our disease; he spoke of *you who are evil*, not *we who are evil*.

Jesus never violated the will of God. To be near him was to be in the presence of one who was perfect in love and in harmony with the Father. We, however, are conflicted. We choose good one moment, evil the next. We are proud of ourselves,

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<sup>14</sup> Roger Thompson, "Becoming a Man," Preaching Today, Tape No. 140.

<sup>15</sup> Neil J. McEleney, "The Unity and Theme of Matthew 7:1-12," *CBQ* 56, 1994, 499.

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then ashamed by our actions. We are fickle and unreliable. We are at war deep within, and were our secret dreams and private thoughts to be revealed, we would all be embarrassed. Pastor Phil is capable of great moral and spiritual evil. Evil crosses my imagination and makes its appeal every day. The seven deadly sins of greed and lust and sloth and envy and pride and gluttony and envy are weeds that grow in my garden, and if I ever quit pulling them up through the grace of repentance, they would take over. Left unattended, human life goes to seed.

But, on the other hand, none of us are wholly given to evil, which is why we remain capable of genuine but partial good. Evil has its limits; it can deface but not obliterate the image of God pressed into us all. What Jesus said was not a contradiction. We who are fatally compromised, are still able, through the goodness of creation and the restraint of God’s grace, to *give good gifts to our children* and carry out deeds of kindness and self-sacrifice. Most parents naturally love their children; there is something wrong with those who treat their own with cruelty. It’s why child abuse and incest strike such a cord of revulsion within us all. We intuitively recognize it as a form of evil.

Jesus’ point in positing both *evil* and *good* in close succession is to make clear that we are each a mixed bag, but that God is not like us in this regard. God is not a mixed bag. “God is light,” claimed John, “and in God is no darkness at all.”<sup>16</sup> All that is good in your life is from God. Our children may find us receptive one day and peevish the next, but not the great God in heaven who only *gives good things to those who ask him*. The reason some of your prayers meet with a *No* or a *Later* or an *It All Depends* is because it is against the nature of God the Father to grant what is not good. It is in continuing to ask and seek and knock and pursue God’s wisdom that our desires are changed into requests God can honor. To pray *in Jesus name* is not to stick a postage stamp on our prayers but to, as best we can, pray for what is on the heart of Jesus and come into tune with his desires.

It’s OK to be excited about the gifts of God, particularly the gifts of the Holy Spirit. They give life and are meant to be shared. I love the story of the little girl named Melissa who received a watch and perfume for her birthday. She was so excited she pestered everyone to look at her watch and smell her cologne. At dinner her mother said, "Honey, I know you're proud of your gifts, but please don't mention

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<sup>16</sup> 1 John 1:5.

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them while we eat." All through dinner Melissa sat silently although she sniffed audibly at times and often raised her wrist to listen to her watch. As the meal came to an end, she blurted out, "I'm not supposed to mention it, but if anyone hears anything or smells anything, it's me."<sup>17</sup>

It is a sign of health in a church when the gifts God gives bring joy instead of envy. Though I may not yet be healed, I am joyful that someone else is. Though my marriage may not be healthy, I am happy for others who enjoy what I hope for. My guess is that it's easier for God to bless those who are pursuing him than those who are enchanted with other matters. Empty hands and raised hands are easy to fill. We are beggars in that we are all needy; we are also children with a generous heavenly Father. And in verse 12 we find that we are commissioned ambassadors of the kingdom of God.

**a') v.12 The Golden Rule.**

It's only been known as *The Golden Rule* since the eighteenth century, and it is perhaps the best known of all Jesus' sayings, "So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets."<sup>18</sup>

There is another form of this saying found in Jewish and pagan sources, only in the negative form of *what you do not wish others to do to you, do not to them*.<sup>19</sup> That is a wise defense against evil, but Jesus was after more. Not that we would just not do harm but that we would actively do good at all times with the resources God supplies. We are to be the happy agents of the kingdom of God our Father, the kingdom demonstrated in Jesus and available now through the Spirit. And we can afford to be generous because there is always more in the supply cabinet. In this sense only the generous can be said to believe in God. The asking and the seeking and the knocking and the wisdom that comes and the Father who gives such good gifts are not just for our benefit; it's so we can give it away and become channels for God's love in every corner of creation. To give you must first receive, but to keep

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<sup>17</sup> PreachingToday.com search under Mt. 7:7-12.

<sup>18</sup> For an application to business ethics, see John C. Maxwell, *There's No Such Thing As Business Ethics* (Warner Business Books, 2003).

<sup>19</sup> Talbert, *Reading*, 134-135.

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**Matthew 7:7-12** ..... **15**

receiving you must start giving. Verses 7 through 11 are all about inflow; verse 12 is about outflow. From God to me, then through me to others, then back to God for more wisdom and all manner of good gifts. All inflow you blow up; all outflow you dry up; and when there is inflow and outflow you grow up.

Remember the movie *Radio* from a decade ago? It's a true story from Anderson S.C. based on a developmentally challenged young man named James Robert Kennedy. He was nicknamed *Radio* by a high school football coach who befriended him.

Coach Jones made Radio part of the practices and a regular fixture on the sidelines during games. Some were uncomfortable having Radio around, despite the fact that he showed kindness to everyone. When treated cruelly, he refused to identify the guilty ones. After receiving a generous outpouring of Christmas gifts, Radio shared with his neighbors. Some members of the community called a meeting to decide what to do with Radio. Coach Jones addressed the gathering:

“We got ourselves a young man we're not thinkin' about. The same young man who could hardly talk when we first met him; now he's making announcements in the mornings on the loudspeaker. The same young man who got himself a football letter last fall, but never wears it cause he can't afford a jacket. Now, we're askin' him to leave. I know some of you don't know or don't care all that Radio's learned over the past few months. But truth is, we're not the one's teachin' Radio; Radio's the one been teachin' us.” Then this great line, “Cause the way he treats us all the time is the way we wish we treated each other even part of the time.”<sup>20</sup>

Love and service are always in style. Know anyone like that at Main Street? I know several. I may preach, but they are our teachers, because in them verse 12 is lived out, “So whatever you wish men would do to you, do so to them (first); for that is the heart of the law and the prophets.” It's what God's after, and it's who we become when we spend long enough asking for the right stuff and seeking the right person and knock, knock, knockin' on heaven's door. We are changed into the kind of people who want the good things of God for everyone we meet.

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<sup>20</sup> PreachingToday.com search under Matthew 7:7-12.

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CONCLUSION

I have no idea who wrote the catalog I am about to read to you. Whoever it was, this much is clear: they mediated long and hard on what helps and what does not. A man once fell into a pit and couldn't get himself out.

“A SUBJECTIVE person came along and said: "I FEEL for you, down there."  
An OBJECTIVE person came along and said: "It's logical that someone would fall, down there."

A CHRISTIAN SCIENTIST came along: "You only THINK that you are in a pit."

A PHARISEE said: "Only BAD people fall into pits."

A MATHEMATICIAN calculated HOW he fell into the pit.

A NEWS REPORTER wanted the exclusive story on his pit.

A FUNDAMENTALIST said: "You DESERVE your pit."

CONFUCIUS said; "If you'd listened to me, you would not be in that pit."

BUDDHA said: "Your pit is only a state of mind."

A REALIST said: "That's a PIT, all right."

A SCIENTIST calculated the pressure necessary (lbs./sq.in.) to get him out of the pit.

A GEOLOGIST told him to appreciate the rock strata in the pit.

AN EVOLUTIONIST said: "You are a rejected mutant destined to be removed from the evolutionary cycle." In other words, he is going to DIE in the pit, so that he cannot produce any pit-falling offspring.

The COUNTY INSPECTOR asked if he had a permit to dig a pit.

The COUNTY TAX ASSESSOR figured the taxes owed on the pit.

A PROFESSOR gave him a lecture on: "The Elementary Principles of the Pit."

An EVASIVE person came along and avoided the subject of his pit altogether.

A SELF-PITYING person said: "You should see MY PIT!!!"

A HEALTH AND WEALTH PREACHER said: "Just CONFESS you're not in a pit."

An OPTIMIST said: "Things COULD be worse."

A PESSIMIST said: "Things WILL get worse!!!"

JESUS, seeing the man, LIFTED HIM OUT of the pit.”

That’s our job. To be the people who, with God’s resources, fulfill the Golden Rule and demonstrate what he kingdom of God looks like when it touches earth. Whatever your job, this is your purpose in life. Everything else is a distraction.

