

Week 18 – Golden Promise and Golden Rule – Matthew 7:7-12

Scripture Reading: Luke 11:5-13

Introduction

As we continue our study of the Sermon on the Mount this morning we come to another very popular passage that contains a couple of well-known, well-loved, and often quoted verses

Unfortunately, since those most loved verses are so often quoted out of context, its popularity largely stems from those verses being misunderstood and misused

As we saw last week we need to always look at every verse within its context so we need to contemplate why Jesus included this teaching at this point in his sermon

Consider that Jesus had told his followers that their righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees if they wanted to enter the kingdom of heaven [**Matthew 5:20**]

And then he went on to present what that exceeding righteousness looks like

Jesus said that kingdom righteousness forbids harboring anger and uttering contemptuous words, dwelling on impure thoughts, dishonesty, and revenge

He taught that kingdom righteousness means we must love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us

Last week we saw that those who desire to have the character of the kingdom are forbidden against making harsh judgments against others but are still expected to be discerning

And all of those things are on top of the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3-11 where we saw a series of statements of exclusive blessings that belong to those, and only those, who meet the requirements listed

At this point in the sermon, I can't see how anyone who truly understands what Jesus is revealing could possibly feel good about himself or herself – the standard is clearly an impossible one to attain on our own

As a matter of fact, the standard of the kingdom is nothing short of perfection as Jesus makes clear in **Matthew 5:48**

In reality, any serious, self-aware person would be tempted to despair of ever entering the kingdom

Now we come to our passage Matthew 7:7-12 which contains a golden promise and the golden rule

Follow along as I read our passage in its entirety [**Matthew 7:7-12**] –

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? 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!

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

The first thing we want to notice is the golden promise: **answered prayers** – that is to say, God promises to answer our prayers

Then we will consider the **crucial question** that gives us the proper understanding of this passage

And lastly we will look at the golden rule which is that we must **act positively**

Let's get started by looking first at The Golden Promise: Answered Prayers

I. The Golden Promise: Answered Prayers

The obvious message of verses 7-11 is that God promises to answer the prayers of his followers

We know the promise is limited to God's followers because that is the audience for the entire sermon

And Jesus gives his followers two instructions as to how to pray and the first is that we must be persistent in our prayers

A. We must pray persistently

Look with me again at verse 7 [Matthew 7:7] where we see an escalation of effort and intensity

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

To ask means to make a request but the Greek word used here also carries with it some nuance that we want to see
First, it means to ask with a sense of urgency – even to the point of demanding – but also asking as a humble petitioner
Second, the word used is what we know as a present imperative which means it denotes continuous, ongoing action
It means don't just ask once and move on but "keep on asking" make asking for things the pattern of your life

The second command is **to seek** and that indicates an upward change in activity

To seek means to attempt to learn or gain something by mounting a careful investigation or search

Seeking is asking plus acting – making earnest petition but also coupling that with active endeavoring to fulfill a need

Again, this is a present imperative that means to seek continually

Then Jesus says his followers should knock and **to knock** means to rap on a door in the hope of having it open to us

Knocking implies a greater intensity and repetitiveness regarding a single petition

The idea here is to keep asking in the face of difficulty or perceived resistance

We can all visualize times when we've known a person was home and knocked on their door and waited, then knocked again and again until we finally got an answer – that's the image in view here

And, once again, this is a present imperative meaning we are to make knocking the pattern of our life regarding prayer

There's an important truth here that we could easily read right past

The activity of prayer – of asking, seeking, and knocking – indicates that we know there is someone listening and implies that we expect an answer to our entreaties

Of course, for the Christ-follower, that someone is our heavenly Father

And if we didn't believe that he was present, listening, and able to answer our petitions there would be absolutely no sensible reason to ask in the first place

In teaching his followers to be persistent in prayer – to keep asking, to keep seeking, and to keep knocking – Jesus is saying that prayer is not just an important thing but that it is a necessary activity for his followers

We would not be stretching things to say praying should be viewed as important and necessary as breathing is

We might be tempted to wonder why God would put us through the rigors of repeated asking, seeking, and knocking rather than just answering our prayers the first time we ask

But we might as well wonder why God makes us ask in the first place because, as we saw in **Matthew 6:8**, God knows what we need before we ask him

God wants us to labor in prayer because it helps us – not just because he delights in seeing us squirm and plead

Persistent prayer isn't meant to overcome God's stubborn reluctance to answer our prayers so as to badger him until he gives in

It's meant to give him glory by demonstrating and expressing our total dependence upon him and by repeatedly asking, seeking, and knocking we find that the requests of our hearts become better aligned with God's will

The second instruction that we see from Jesus is that we must pray confidently

B. We must pray confidently

James writes [James 1:6] that we should ask in faith without doubting and Jesus says much the same thing here

In fact, Jesus says that the person who prays in the way of continually asking, seeking, and knocking will have his prayers answered

We see it promised in verse 7 and then Jesus repeats the promise in verse 8 [Matthew 7:8] for emphasis
For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.

And by “everyone” Jesus means “every true believer”

Then, in verses 9-11, Jesus uses another *a fortiori* argument to illustrate what he is saying

Remember, that is an argument that says “if this is true then this other is even more true” and Jesus uses these arguments often

In this case he uses the illustration of an earthly father’s love and care for his child and says that no father would give their child a stone when they asked for bread or a serpent when they asked for a fish

We readily recognize just how reprehensible such actions would be and any father who would do such a thing would be universally condemned

But, even the best earthly father can make a mistake

They can sincerely think and believe that they are doing the right thing only to discover later they were wrong

But God never makes mistakes

So, in comparison to our heavenly Father, earthly fathers would be viewed as evil and Jesus says that since an evil father knows how to give good gifts to his children, God knows even better how to give us the good things we need

God never makes mistakes and it’s his practice to often give us even more or better than we know to ask for

The golden promise of this passage is that God will answer our prayers when we pray with persistence and confidence

This passage is often included in sermon series and lessons dealing with the subject of prayer and most of them stop right here with the point being made that asking with persistence will get us what we ask for

But there is a crucial question that we must answer in order to understand what Jesus is actually teaching in this passage

II. The Crucial Question

And that question is this: **What is the “it” that Jesus says we will receive? [Question]**

Has Jesus just handed his followers a blank check they can fill in with whatever they want and, if they pray with persistence, they are guaranteed to receive it?

I refer to this as the Janis **Joplin** interpretation [**Mercedes Benz**]

We chuckle at that little song because we know it’s ridiculous to think that God is going to shower us with Mercedes and color TVs and to expect God to show us he loves us by buying the next round during our night on the town

But what about when it comes to praying for serious things – things that we sincerely believe couldn’t violate God’s will?

We’ve all asked for things we didn’t receive – maybe we asked for a special gift at Christmas, or asked the boss for a raise or a promotion – we’ve all known the disappointment of not getting what we asked for from other people

And for the most part we come to learn that being disappointed when we ask other people for things is just a part of life that we have to accept

But when we sincerely and fervently ask God for things and don’t receive them, that’s a whole different matter

Especially when we’ve been taught to believe that we can ask for anything and expect to receive it

Sadly, there are many who understand this passage in just that way

But, that's largely because they pluck these verses out of their context and consider them in isolation as I said a few minutes ago in my introduction and **a text taken out of context leads is a pretext**

And we know all too well that that interpretation has led many people to have a great deal of disappointment with God
That's the problem with the prosperity gospel and word of faith teachings

They pluck this and other verses out of context and have caused countless people to wonder if God didn't mean what he said or if their prayers were somehow deficient when the things they earnestly prayed for didn't come to pass

Context is key to interpretation and we ignore context at our peril

As we've studied the Sermon on the Mount we've seen that its overall context is Jesus describing the character of those who are citizens of the kingdom of heaven

And, again as I laid out in my introduction, we've come to recognize just how the sermon reveals our need because the character of the kingdom is unattainable on our own

Any serious, self-aware person who understands what Jesus has shown us up to this point in the sermon knows beyond any doubt that he or she could never measure up to the standard Jesus says is required to enter the kingdom

At least not of their own volition or according to their own efforts – we all fall short [**Romans 3:23**]

No one is capable, on his own, of even coming close to the quality of life we find described by the Sermon on the Mount

And we know without a doubt that no one will ever enter the ultimate kingdom through a program of self-improvement in an effort to make himself presentable to God – works cannot save us no matter how noble and pure those works are

When truly understand the message of the sermon we come to understand that we need help and that divine assistance is essential if we are going to meet the divine requirements that Jesus describes

In fact, the first Beatitude found in **Matthew 5:3** tells us that the kingdom of heaven exclusively belongs to the poor in spirit – to those who acknowledge their complete and total spiritual bankruptcy

And it's within that context that Jesus presents this teaching on persistence in prayer and the context defines what the "it" means

The promise before us actually loops back a bit to **Matthew 6:33** where Jesus, after teaching that God would supply all our needs said,

But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these [temporal] things will be added to you

Jesus exhorts and encourages his followers to look to God for the supply of grace they need to live according to the standard of the kingdom and promises that, when they persist in asking for it, God will provide it

We are to ask, and keep on asking to receive the kingdom

We are to seek, and keep on seeking, to practice the virtues of the kingdom

We are to knock, and keep on knocking, on the door to heaven's throne room until God gives us the character we need
In other words, we are to continually, passionately, and persistently pray for our spiritual lives and for our growth in the character of the kingdom

And, when we do that with persistence, God promises to answer

A common question in church circles is why the spiritual lives of many believers seem to be rather anemic and I believe the answer is right here in front of us

Generally speaking, the lives of most Christians in our culture are not characterized by the type of prayer Jesus describes here

At best, most of us throw the occasional prayer heavenward when we don't see any other option

We're kind of like the man who was told by his pastor that the church was praying for his recovery from a serious illness
And he exclaimed, "Oh dear! Don't tell me it's come to that!"

We may occasionally ask for things or for favors but when was the last time you asked God to mature your spiritual life?
Have you ever done more than ask and gotten busy with seeking to improve your spiritual life and have you persistently continued to knock and respectfully insist that God answer you?

Remember, those commands are present imperatives and God means for us to be doing them on an ongoing basis and not just occasionally when we see no other alternative

Asking, seeking, and knocking for our spiritual lives is to be the pattern of our lives

We typically admire the lone-wolf, do it yourself mindset that we see celebrated all around us and we hate to have to ask for anything believing that asking makes us weak – our culture looks down on those who are dependent

But, as we have seen repeatedly, there is no other way to receive the virtues of the kingdom unless God gives them to us

And since a Christ-follower can make no spiritual progress apart from God's grace, we should recognize there is nothing more crucial than persistently asking God for that grace secure in the knowledge that he promises to give it to us

Always be asking, always be seeking, and always be knocking for your spiritual growth [**Matthew 7:8**]

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

That's the meaning of the Golden Promise

Now let's turn our attention to the Golden Rule which is to Act Positively

III. The Golden Rule: Act Positively

Let's read verse 12 again [**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.

Again, this is a much-loved verse that most of have memorized although we probably memorized the principle, do unto others as you would have them do unto you, rather than the actual verse itself

And again, we tend to treat this as a standalone verse – which in this case probably isn't terribly bad since it is a good principle to live by – but still, we do well to ask why Jesus included this command here

We know it's meant to tie into what comes before since it begins with the word, "so" which we know indicates a continuation and causation of some kind

Well, this verse pairs up with **Matthew 5:17** where Jesus says he didn't come to abolish the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them and forms what is known as an *inclusio*

An *inclusio* is a section of Scripture that is bracketed by a repeated phrase showing that it functions as a unit

And this *inclusio* indicates that the Sermon on the Mount is concerned with how the kingdom fulfills the Law and the Prophets

In chapter 5 Jesus taught about the personal attitudes and actions that characterize the kingdom

Then in chapter 6 Jesus warned against performing outward acts of personal righteousness in the hypocritical attempt to appear holy and insisted on possessing the perspectives of the kingdom

Then, as we saw last week, Jesus turned to the danger of being judgmental along with the twin danger of lacking discernment

The Sermon on the Mount has, therefore, dealt not only with internal attitudes and character but how we interact with those around us

Now Jesus wraps up his sermon so far as it deals with others by stating what we call the Golden Rule

It's sort of a summary statement that captures what Jesus has thus far taught about our relationship with each other

There have been many versions of the Golden Rule put out there in a rather tongue in cheek manner – such as

“Do unto others *before* they do unto you” or “Do unto other *as they would do unto you if they had the chance*”

And virtually every religion has a negative version of the rule that says something like –

“Do not do anything to anyone that you would not want him to do to you”

But Jesus gives us the *positive* form which is highly significant

Rather than saying something like – If you don't enjoy being punched in the nose, don't punch others in the nose

Or, if you don't like being badmouthed, don't badmouth others

Jesus says – If you like to receive good gifts, give good gifts to others; If you like being thanked and appreciated, thank and appreciate others; If you want people to be tolerant of you, be tolerant of others; If you want others to assume the best about you; assume the best about others

The way Jesus states the rule doesn't allow us to be passively satisfied to simply do no harm to others

Rather, it calls for us to actively do good – whatever you would really like done to you; do that to others

But this command shouldn't imply a mercenary spirit – that is to say we don't do unto other *so that they will do unto us*

In a purely practical sense, getting something from others can't be our motivation because there is no guarantee that they will reciprocate in kind

The reason we are to do unto others what we would like others to do to us is because such behavior sums up the Law and the Prophets concerning our relationship to others Remember, the Sermon on the Mount is about the kingdom

And this passage is about how to grow in the character of the kingdom and how we treat our fellow man is a key part of that because we can only grow in kingdom character as we imitate God's loving and benevolent nature

So, what Jesus is saying with this summary statement is that behaving in this way conforms to the character of the kingdom and, as we have seen, the kingdom is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets

And in saying that he means insofar as the Law and the Prophets speak to our relationship to others

Conclusion

Many people love the Sermon on the Mount because, in it, they see an obviously excellent standard of human conduct and morality

The problem is, they also believe that a person can achieve the standard through a bit of education and self-discipline and a whole lot of effort

But they tend to overlook the truth that nothing short of perfection is required and they therefore miss the fact that the standard of the kingdom is impossible to achieve through force of will and effort alone

It can only be received – not achieved – but the really good news is that God has promised it to us if we will only continue asking, seeking, and knocking for it

And as we grow in the character of the kingdom we will find it easier to follow the Golden Rule and reflect God's goodness in our treatment of others

Next week we will begin looking at the conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount as Jesus presents us with three binary choices as we determine how we will react to what he has taught

Let's pray