

ASK FOR WHAT YOU WANT

SERIES: BLESSED ARE



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Matthew 7:7-12
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Paul Taylor
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My wife and I lived in Dallas for four years while I was attending seminary. We moved there with a six-week-old and had two more children while we there. You could say it was a fruitful season.

Life with young children can be exhausting as many of you know. But everything is worse when you get sick. One time when our children were little, both my wife and I came down with a terrible flu. We were continually vomiting and could barely move.

The flu struck us in the middle of the night. We'd already put the kids to bed when the worst of it hit. It was around midnight, and we were barely able to move. The kids were asleep, but 6 am was coming quickly when they'd be awake. What would we do then? There was no way we could get out of bed and care for three children under three.

My parents lived in Houston, about four hours away. We called my dad and explained our situation. We told him that we'd see how the next few hours go and asked if he'd be available to drive up and help us with the kids. He didn't hesitate. Of course he'd drive 200 miles in the middle of the night to care for his grandchildren.

My dad waited, and we tried our best to sleep. Things were better, though, because we knew all we had to do was make that call and my dad would be in the car.

Have you ever made a request like that? A big favor? What happened when you do that? Did the person say yes? Or no? Have you ever wanted to ask for a big favor but you didn't because you didn't know what the answer would be?

We're in the middle of a series right now called "Blessed Are." Early in his ministry, Jesus spoke to a group of Jewish peasants on the hills above the Sea of Galilee. He told them that the kingdom of the heavens was available to them. His message described what life looks like for those who live in this spiritual kingdom.

For the last several weeks, we've been looking at a section of this sermon where Jesus focused on how God takes care of his people. Before the holidays, we heard about storing up treasures in heaven. Jesus told his listeners to seek first the kingdom of God, and everything that they need would be supplied to them. Last week we were warned away from our temptation to control other people to get what we want.

The question that Jesus has been addressing is one that we all ask: what can we expect from God? We're not supposed to lay up treasures. We're not supposed to control other people. Jesus is asking us to give up all our standard strategies for getting by in this world. If we're not supposed to do those things, how do we get what we need?

Jesus's answer is incredibly simple: ask for what you want.

His answer may seem simple, but this is a radical suggestion. Most of us don't relate to God this way. Sometimes we do, but most of the time we don't ask for what we want. A lot of the time, we don't even know what we want. And when we do know what we want, there are all sorts of reasons why we stop short of asking God for it.

Maybe we're embarrassed by what we want. Perhaps we don't think God will say yes. Perhaps we're tried before. Maybe we're used to getting by on our own. Living by these words is a radical spiritual lifestyle.

Jesus doesn't stop with how we relate to God. He wraps up this section by broadening everything. This section isn't just about how we relate to God. Jesus ends this passage with the famous "Golden Rule." And we're going to see how this way of relating—asking for what you want—isn't just about how we relate to God; it lies at the heart of every healthy relationship.

We'll talk about asking and receiving and giving generously. Then we'll see how all of this applies not just to how we relate to God, but how we relate to others as well. Let's see what Jesus has to say.

Asking and receiving

Jesus starts with a powerful but confusing statement.

Matthew 7:7-8:

“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.”

This statement is highly stylized speech, with are two sets of three statements. Granting requests, seeking for treasure, and knocking on doors are all used symbolically throughout the Bible. Jesus is probably not intending to highlight three different cases, as if asking, seeking, and knocking refer to different things. More likely, he is emphasizing a single point. In general, he is saying that when you ask for something, you'll get it.

Now we start to scratch our heads. It sounds like Jesus is saying, “Whatever you ask for, you will receive.” And our experience says that this isn't exactly true.

Let's stop for a moment and consider if this thought were true. Can you imagine if I could ask for something, anything, and God would do it. That would be absurd! It would also create chaos. I ask God for rain, and you ask God for sun, and someone else asks for snow. It would be impossible.

Incidentally, this is the kind of god we're trying to build with our personal assistant devices. “Alexa, play Michael Buble.” “Alexa, start my car.” “Alexa, make it rain.” “Alexa, find me a job.” We want a god who grants every request we make. But that's not a god. Our God is not a genie in a bottle.

So what did Jesus mean?

Some people think he meant that God gives us whatever we ask for. People call this the “name it and claim it” version of Christianity. If you have enough faith, God will give you whatever you ask. But it's clear that isn't what is going on.

Others go to the other extreme. They are disillusioned because they've asked for something and haven't gotten it. They've concluded that God doesn't give us what we ask for, and Jesus' words are nothing but an empty promise. I suspect that some of us think that way, maybe without even realizing it.

But Jesus is making a proverbial statement. It's like “The early bird gets the worm” or “An apple a day keeps the doctor away.” Early birds don't always get worms. Eating an apple every day doesn't guarantee that you won't get sick. These are broad observations about the way the world works.

Jesus is saying that generally speaking, the way of the world is that requests are granted. That's how it is supposed to work. You don't get something you don't ask for; you don't find something you aren't looking for; no door is opened unless you knock on it. And most of the time, asking, seeking, and knocking results in receiving, finding, and open doors.

We're afraid to run into people who might ask us for something. We will go far out of our way to avoid a request because we hate saying no to someone who asks for something. We're uncomfortable saying no. It feels rude not to open a door when someone knocks on it.

When we relate to God, we need to keep this principle in mind: asking usually leads to receiving. This principle means we should ask God for what we want.

Dallas Willard calls this “the way of the request.” It's a simple enough way to relate to God. So why don't we always do this?

Asking is risky. When I ask, I admit that I want something. That's vulnerable. When I ask, I confess that I am not ultimately in control. That's weak. When I ask, my request could be denied. I could be rejected. Asking might usually lead to receiving, but sometimes it leads to rejection, disappointment, and failure.

When we want something, it's much easier to demand it than to ask for it. That feels much better. When I demand, I assert my own power. Demanding puts me on top. Demands can't be denied. Demanding feels safe.

When I talk to Alexa, I'm not really asking her to do something, I'm demanding that she do something. This is where it gets complicated. Sometimes it is difficult to tell the difference between a demand and a request. Grammar doesn't always tell the whole story.

Just ask my kids. When I ask one of them, “Will you please take the trash out?” it *sounds* like a request, but that's not really a request.

When you are asking for something, two things are true. First, the other person has the freedom to say yes

or no. A true request honors the free will of the other person. You are putting your desire in their hands.

Second, if they say yes, you receive what they give. Your hand is open. You don't do anything. All you do is receive their gift. You have put your desire in their hands. And you have opened your own to receive their response.

That's not really what I'm doing when I ask my kids to take out the trash. It's more of an instruction. And that's perfectly appropriate in that kind of a situation.

But when we turn toward God, we can't instruct him. We can't demand anything. Demanding doesn't result in receiving and demanding leads to taking. The way of the request is to ask and receive. This is the way of the kingdom of the heavens. The way of the world is to demand and take.

Of course, there's one more option, the passive option. We don't have the power to demand. We don't have the courage to ask, so we deny our desires and close ourselves off. For some of us, this is the safest choice because you never have to admit that you want anything. You keep what you want inside. You stuff it down, and you never show weakness.

Read what Jesus' brother James was talking about.

James 4:2:

You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask.

When you want something, you have many options. You can demand it. Sometimes we do that to God. If you know that won't work, you can deny your desire.

But Jesus' suggestion cuts through all of that. It's so simple. Ask for what you want.

Asking is dangerous. There are reasons why we haven't asked God. There be danger in a request. What if God doesn't say yes? That's what Jesus addresses next.

Receive good things from God

One of main reasons we don't ask for what we want is that we don't trust the one we're asking from. I was comfortable calling my dad at midnight because I knew how we would reply. I trust the character of my father.

It's no coincidence that when Jesus wants to assure us of God's character, he uses fathers as an example.

Matthew 7:9-11:

“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!”

The first thing to notice is that Jesus has changed our position in this example. In the first few verses, we were the ones asking and receiving. Presumably, someone else was doing the giving. But now Jesus asks us to imagine ourselves as the one being asked of. If you're not a father, imagine yourself as one. If you son asks you for bread, would you give him a stone?

James said that we do not have because we do not ask. Why don't we ask? Because we don't think God will say yes. So Jesus asks us to put ourselves in the position of God. Do we really think God will say no to a legitimate request? Do we really think God would trick us and give us something terrible when we asked for something good? Some of you do.

But Jesus concludes that God gives good things to those who ask him. This is an incredible statement. I want to make a few observations based on what Jesus is saying.

First, God will not necessarily give you what you don't ask for. Twice in the previous chapter, Jesus points out that God knows what you need. Our requests aren't new information for God. He knows what we need. He knows everything.

The point is in the asking. Jesus says the Father gives good things *to those who ask him*. The point is not the stuff; the point is the relationship. God wants us to reach out to him. What fun is it if he just drops what we need at our doorstep without being asked? That's not a relationship.

The second point that follows is that our prayer changes God's work in the world. When we pray, something different happens because of it. There are two dramatic Old Testament examples which prove this point. Moses asked God to spare a city and changed God's mind! Hezekiah prayed for healing, so God changed his plans and healed him.

The New Testament is full of examples as well. Prayer changes the course of the world.

Many of us don't believe this. We tend to think that prayer is only a formality. Maybe prayer changes us. But the Bible could not be clearer. Time and time again, when God's people pray, the course of history is changed. That's incredible.

And now we get to our final observation. In general, God will give you what you ask for. This is the main idea that Jesus is getting at. Most of the time, God answers yes.

I'm not sure if I really believe that in my heart. I suspect some of you may be skeptical as well. Some of us think that God's default position is no. Sometimes, if we happen to ask him for what he was going to do anyway, he'll say yes.

But over and over again, the Bible teaches us this crazy fact. God's default position is yes. Sometimes he says no, but usually he says yes.

If that's true, then it changes everything. If I really believe that, I'll ask God a lot more than I do today. I believe this about my earthly father. I know that he'll do anything in his power to help me if I ask. I believe that so strongly that I hesitate to ask him because I know how far out of his way he'll go to say yes.

But do I believe that about my heavenly Father? Not in the same way. But if I did... This is what Jesus wants to transform within us. We can trust God's goodness.

Trust that God is a "Father who will give good things to those who ask of him."

I know what some of you are thinking. You have asked God for something—you've asked him for something good—and he has said no. Or perhaps you haven't asked for anything, but he's given you some really hard things to walk through. Why would he make life so hard if he is the kind of father who gives good things to those who ask him?

Maybe you've prayed for a child to survive, for a marriage to be reconciled, for mental health to stabilize, for peace in your family, for healing from a disease, or for success in your career. All of those are good things. All of them are in line with how the world is supposed to work. If you've prayed for those things or others and haven't heard a response, it's hard to trust in God's goodness.

I know what you're feeling. I've been through a lot of pain, and it's hard to trust God's goodness when you're in pain. I've asked for a lot of things and it doesn't seem God has answered all my requests. But I've also lived long enough to see how things can resolve later on.

When we ask God for something, we put our desires in his hands. We open up our own and we trust his goodness to respond. And he will! Sometimes the timing looks different. Sometimes he'll resolve the situation in a different or deeper way. Often we ask for the easy solution and he responds with something much deeper. But ask him. He is there.

Imagine if my wife and I had just said we'd figure out a way to deal with our kids and we don't need to bother my dad. It turns out we would have been fine. We ended up not needing to call him. We felt better enough in the morning to make things work. But that call did something in my relationship with my father. I asked him and he said yes. And one more thread was woven between us, connecting us in our relationship. He didn't actually have to make that drive, but we moved closer because I asked and he responded.

This closeness is what God offers us. This is the kind of intimacy we can have with our heavenly Father. My earthly father said yes to a big favor. How much more will our Father in heaven lavish his love upon us?

But we have to ask. Trust that God is good.

Jesus has laid an incredibly simple foundation for how we relate to God. Now he does what Jesus does best—he introduces a twist. He takes that foundation for the heavenly relationship and applies to our relationships with each other.

The golden rule

The last verse in this section is a summary, not just for what Jesus has just been saying here, but for most of chapters 6 and 7. It's an interesting summary because a lot of the previous material has been about how God takes care of us, and now Jesus focuses on how we treat each other.

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.

This verse is one of the most famous statements in the entire Bible. It's the golden rule. It's very simple—one sentence to summarize all of the Law and the Prophets. But following this instruction is very difficult to way to live. Imagine a world where everyone followed this simple rule!

It's no mistake that Jesus offers this instruction in the context of asking, giving, and receiving. We could say a lot about this instruction. But what if we went with the context and applied Jesus' instructions about asking and receiving to the way we relate to other people? That might result in two simple ideas.

First, ask for what you want from others. Don't expect others to know how to relate to you. Don't drop hints or try to manipulate them. Don't creep around the edges of an issue. If you're interested in getting to know someone better, ask them. If you're in the middle of a conflict with them, ask them to reconcile. If you wish they'd treat you differently, ask them. All of this is incredibly risky.

But this way of relating to others has the power to transform a relationship altogether.

Secondly, whenever you are able, say yes to others. Say yes whenever possible. This instruction is incredibly powerful for parents, managers, and anyone in a position of authority. Do you see your role as finding ways to say yes to the people whom you care for? Of course, you can't always say yes. But if that's your goal, then something amazing will happen.

There was a movie a few years ago called *Yes Man* in which the main character decided to say yes to everything. Of course, that action ended up getting him into some strange situations, but it also changed his life. What if the people around you asked for what they wanted and you tried to say yes whenever you could?

These are pretty simple guides for a relationship. Ask for what you want. Whenever possible, say yes to others.

This process lies at the heart of intimacy. Until you ask for something from someone, you are merely an acquaintance. But a relationship progresses as you ask for more and more, and the other person says yes in deeper and deeper ways. A relationship stalls when requests are denied and someone starts withholding themselves.

Even Facebook works this way. What's the first thing you do with someone on Facebook? You ask them to be

your friend. You're only "friends" if they say yes. You ask for what you want. They say yes. And boom! You're friends. But only in the shallowest of possible ways.

Asking and giving and receiving isn't just how we relate to God. It's how we relate to everyone around us. As we become kingdom dwellers, we are shaped into the kinds of people who ask, receive, and give rather than the kinds of people who demand, take, and withhold. Jesus is saying to us: ask, receive, and give.

I find this instruction helpful because as Christians sometimes we only emphasize the giving part. We're supposed to give of ourselves. We're supposed to love sacrificially. We're only supposed to think about other people. It can feel weird to be an asker, and many of us are uncomfortable being receivers.

But the full life of the kingdom of the heavens involves being an asker, a receiver, and a giver—all of those combined together. We are always tempted to demand, to take, and to withhold. But that's not what life looks like in the kingdom of the heavens.

We become askers, receivers, and givers because that is who God is. When you live in the kingdom of the heavens, you become more and more like the king of the heavens. God doesn't demand anything from us. He gives us complete free will to deny him at every turn. God doesn't take anything from us. He receives our worship as a free gift. And he is does not withhold himself. He is a giver. He is the original giver of life, of love, of all good things.

Some people think that God demands, takes, and withholds. That thinking shapes the way they live and interact with others. But when you live in the kingdom that Jesus says is near at hand, you find out who God really is. Our God asks. Our God receives. And most of all, our God gives. When you enter his kingdom, when you follow Jesus, you too will learn and grow to ask, receive, and give.

Conclusion

I had the confidence to call my earthly father in the middle of the night and ask him to drive 200 miles to help watch my three infant children. I knew if it were at all possible, he would say yes.

Do you have that kind of confidence in your heavenly Father? Do you know that if you ask something of him, he will generally say yes in some way? Do you believe

that? If we know how to give good gifts, how much more does our heavenly Father—the original giver—know how to give good gifts when we ask.

To respond to this, I'd like to invite you to do what Jesus says. Simply knowing that God will answer your requests doesn't matter if you don't actually ask God for something. So I'd like to give you some time to make your request to God. Ask for what you need.

Maybe there's something you've been afraid to ask for. Perhaps you think it's selfish, or it seems impossible, or you've been asking for a long time. Take some time now and ask. Take that risk. Ask God for what you want.