

The Way We Live: An Exploration of The Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 7:7-12

(***Please note, the bookmarks/reading schedule say that we're covering 7:7-14 this week, but upon further review, we're making an adjustment and only covering 7:7-12 this week.***)

Last week we ended with some hanging questions: How do we help others? (Especially if that help might involve correction.) And what if they are not accepting of our help? Jesus continues His thoughts on the matter...

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; everyone who seeks finds; and everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.” (Matthew 7:7-8)

As I've been pointing out throughout this series, it is easy to pull Jesus' teachings out of context. These two little verses need to be understood through what precedes them. As James Bryan Smith explains...

“Most people read this section as if it were unrelated to the previous verses, as if Jesus suddenly switched topics from judgment to prayer. While it is about prayer, I don't think Jesus has switched subjects. The issue is still about helping others. After He has told us how not to help others, He now tells us how to benefit others, which is to begin with prayer.”

If/when we care about people, and desire to help them, the first place we should go to is prayer. Why? Because as much as we might care about someone, God cares about them infinitely more. God knows them and the situation better. God is wiser and has far more resources at His disposal than we do. And, as Jesus warned in the previous section from last week, our own hearts may not be as pure as we like to think they are, so going to God in prayer really ought to be our first move/instinct all the time.

As James Bryan Smith continues, *“Prayer is a wonderful gift from God that helps us in at least three ways. First and foremost, we are inviting God into the situation. We are not alone, but are collaborating with God in an effort to help others. Second, we begin to feel more compassion and less criticism. Third, we have the wisdom of God available to us. God can provide guidance and perspectives that we do not have on our own.”*

In his classic little book *Life Together* Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us, *“Because Christ stands between me and others, I dare not desire direct fellowship with them...This means that I must release the other person from every attempt of mine to regulate, coerce, and dominate them with my love. The other person needs to retain their independence of me; to be loved for what they are, as one for whom Christ became man, died, and rose again, for whom Christ bought forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Because Christ has long since acted decisively for them before I could begin to act, I must leave them their freedom to be Christ's; I must meet them only as the person that they already are in Christ's eyes. This is the meaning of the proposition that we can meet others only through the mediation of Christ.”* In other words, we never truly deal with another person one-on-one. Christ is always present. So it is in and through Christ that

we deal with other people. As Bonhoeffer continues, “[We] will speak to Christ about a brother/sister more than to a brother/sister about Christ...the most direct way to others is always through prayer to Christ.”

The most loving thing we can do for another person (and love should always be our motivation) is to go to God in prayer...seeking God on their behalf, or taking our issue with them to God for examination/evaluation...because maybe we’re the problem. Prayer is a humble acknowledgment that maybe we’re wrong and need perspective. So, among other things, prayer is a way of checking our heart, our attitude, our posture.

Now there’s something crucial we must see/understand that, sadly, many English translations don’t pick up on. “Ask”, “Seek”, and “Knock”, should technically, and more accurately be translated as “Keep asking...”, “Keep seeking...”, “Keep knocking...” Why is this important?

Well, I assume we’ve all had the experience of praying for something and not receiving an answer, or not an answer we wanted. Or, it just seems that God is silent, uninvolved, unconcerned. Where’s the “...and it will be given to you...you will find...the door will be open”?

In his wonderful little book on prayer, *Praying Like Monks, Living Like Fools: An Invitation to the Wonder and Mystery of Prayer*, Tyler Staton says, “Of everything that Jesus had to say on the subject of prayer, there are perhaps no more famous or confusing words than the three simple verbs—ask, seek, knock—He uses in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7. One the one hand, they issue an empowering and straightforward invitation, and on the other hand, this invitation doesn’t deliver consistent, predictable results. Was this false advertising? Did Jesus overpromise? Or is His original meaning lost in translation across centuries, traditions, and translations?”

Staton goes on to say, “Prayer is a journey that starts with need and ends in relationship.” Allow me to borrow from, and riff on, Staton for a bit... (though if you’re the reading type, I’d recommend reading this delightful and insightful book)...

- **Ask**...refers to the need, or to the request, that brings us to prayer in the first place. As needs and questions, doubts and confusions, concerns and challenges come our way (and they inevitably will)...go to God—ASK. This should be our practice, our habit, our default. We are not left on our own. God is present and active...go to Him.
- **Seek**...takes things to another level. We’ve already seen this word used in the previous chapter (“But *SEEK* first His Kingdom and His righteousness...” ~ Matthew 6:33) For Jesus’ audience, and especially within the context of prayer, the book of Psalms would have come to mind when they heard that word. Within the prayer and poetry of the Psalms, seeking God was the highest priority. While we tend to “seek” desirable results/outcomes, and that may be what brings us to God in prayer in the first place, what we “find” is God Himself. The practice of prayer is designed to teach us that the true and best treasure/reward (remember those terms from the last chapter) is God.

Prayer allows us to deepen our relationship with God. The “result” we are promised is God giving Himself in relationship.

- **Knock**...this is actually a picture of hospitality, which connotes table fellowship. This is imagery we wouldn't naturally pick up on, but Jesus' original audience would have. They were from a culture that had a very different understanding of hospitality and sharing a table than we do. In the culture of the ancient Near East, to bring someone into your home is to offer them security, provision, and solidarity. Table fellowship denotes acceptance, dignity, equality. As Staton points out, *“To dine with someone back then was not merely to tolerate their company while getting some much-needed nourishment. To share a table was the greatest affirmation of their character and the truest and deepest form of intimacy...Prayer—in any form, by anybody—is God’s invitation to pull up a chair to the table and enjoy restful, intimate, unbroken conversation with the triune God.”*

A very famous icon of the Church that dates back to the fifteenth century is by Russian painter Andrei Rublev called *The Trinity* (see below). It is a representation of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit enjoying table fellowship. Notice that one side of the table is open...the side facing the viewer...the implication is that of an invitation to join them at the table.



Just this morning I was reading a devotion by Skye Jethani that spoke to this very topic... *“Jews in ancient Israel used the table to define a person’s community and identity. Who you ate with determined your social status and your destiny, and being welcomed to a table was also a powerful sign of reconciliation...Before He was identified as the divine Messiah, Jesus was widely seen as a brilliant rabbi. Other religious leaders, however, were disturbed by*

Jesus' eagerness to share His table with outcasts—tax collectors, prostitutes, sinners, and others kept on the margins of society. This was not the behavior of a reputable teacher, let alone one who was heralded as a prophet of God. In fact, Jesus' meals became a source of repeated controversy and debate. Some even pointed to His table mates as proof that He was not a prophet, because by welcoming sinners to His table He was elevating their status and diminishing His own... We often look at Jesus' habit of sharing a table with sinners as a reflection of His grace and hospitality. It was certainly that, but there's another dimension we must not overlook. Theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg says it this way: 'We have in these meals the central symbolic action of Jesus in which His message of the nearness of God's reign and its salvation is focused and vividly depicted... Everything that separates from God is removed in the table fellowship that Jesus practiced.' In other words, the essence of Jesus' message was manifested in His meals."

There are really 3 great symbols of the Christian faith. Obviously the one we are most familiar with is the Cross. But the other two are just as important: the Empty Tomb and the Table. The Crucifixion, the Resurrection...and the longed-for Fellowship...which is the reason and result of the first two. (Incidentally, this rich, deep, and important symbolism is the reason we call them "Table Groups".) A sign of God's kingdom come is the sharing of a table by people who previously would not have shared a table. This is a posture/attitude learned by experiencing God's hospitality toward us in prayer.

So we are to begin any attempt at helping others in/through/by prayer. But Jesus also wants His followers to understand that the purpose of prayer is less about getting the results/outcomes we were hoping for, and more about enjoying deep and intimate fellowship with God. That's how/why we can view prayer (Ask...seek...knock) as a journey from need to relationship. The guarantee or promise Jesus is offering here is not that our prayers will be answered, but that what we will be given, what we will find, is HIM. We may or may not get what we asked for, but we will always get Him...and that's the greater/greatest gift and promise.

And again, the emphasis is on persistence (KEEP asking...KEEP seeking...KEEP knocking) which over time will form us through the practice/habit of continually going to God in prayer. As you've heard me say numerous times (quoting Brian Zahnd), "*the primary purpose of prayer is not to get God to do what we think He ought to do, but to be rightly formed*". (For additional teaching on prayer from Jesus that complements this section of the Sermon on the Mount, see also Luke 11:1-13 and Luke 18:1-14.)

The illustration Jesus then offers (7:9-11) invites us to trust in God's goodness and wisdom. If we, with all our flaws and limits, know how to do right by our children, doesn't it stand to reason that our great, big, good, wise, and loving God can be trusted to do right by us? The implied question here is, "*Do you actually think you're better than God?*" While we immediately recognize the absurdity of such a thought, it's that same absurdity lived out that is the human condition...going all the way back to the Garden of Eden. We do, in fact, tend to trust ourselves more than we trust God. We could even say that the grand story of Scripture is of God trying to get us reconsider that tendency and that posture. (And that's basically what Jesus is doing in this Sermon as well.)


Now let's bring all of this home a little bit. I suspect all of us have, or have had, struggles and challenges in our lives in which we pray about. Allow me to get a little personal here. When our daughter was a teenager she was...let's call it...wayward. It was a tremendous challenge for Angela and me, and it caused no small disruption/disturbance to our home and family. Needless to say, I/we spent much time in prayer for our daughter and our relationship with her. Did our prayer change her much? Honestly, I don't know...though things have stabilized quite a bit. But I can say, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that I was changed in and through that season of life. God would repeatedly bring to mind the Parable of the Prodigal (see Luke 15), and particularly the father in that parable who represents God. By regularly, persistently, praying to God, father to Father, I caught a glimpse of God's heart for people, and experienced the Father's heart toward me. I would say this changed me profoundly, and was pivotal in my continued process of formation...my journey of Becoming. This is the gift and promise of prayer. And while I still have some hopes for my daughter, some ways I'd like to "help" her, and she's still a topic of conversation between God and me. I'm considerably less angry about it and I'm able to trust God with her care. He loves her far more than I ever could...and I don't need to control the results/outcomes of her life.

This type and level of trust is very important if we're going to live into the type of life and relationships God wants for us. And it's at this point in the Sermon that Jesus lays out what we have come to know as the "Golden Rule". *"So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets."* (7:12)

We've heard this...we know this...we like this...it makes sense...and yet, it's much easier said than done, isn't it? Why is that? Remember, our strongest motivations and impulses are our fears and desires. But in order to fulfill the Golden Rule, we have to check ourselves. How do our fears and/or desires affect others? Or, in our attempts to secure our desires and mitigate our fears, how are others being affected? Would we want to be affected similarly? As we learn to trust God with results/outcomes, we become people who can more easily and naturally apply and live out the Golden Rule.

By mentioning the "*Law and the Prophets*" here, Jesus is calling His listeners back to what He said earlier in the Sermon, *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."* (5:17) Recall, as a rabbi, it was expected that Jesus would offer His take, His interpretation of, the Scripture (the Law and the Prophets). Throughout the Sermon He has been doing just that. With the "Golden Rule" He offers a summary as He prepares to conclude His Sermon. We'll look at His conclusion over the next couple of weeks as we wrap up this series.

In closing, I've included a link to a song/video that we sing here at CUMC (at least in the contemporary service...though I seem to recall singing it during the summer in one of our combined services). It fits the theme of this week...may it bless and encourage you.

 [Matthew West - Don't Stop Praying \(Lyric Video\)](#)

Potential Discussion Questions

- Would you describe your practice of prayer more as a “last resort” or “first instinct”? Explain. Or, what sort of things do you make matters of prayer, and which do you tend to handle on your own? Or, perhaps more simply, why do you pray and when do you pray?
- In your experience of praying for something or someone, when have you experienced that YOU were actually the one changed or affected?
- As you consider the relationships in your life, how conscious are you that Christ is present and mediating in those relationships? How does the reality of Christ’s mediation affect those relationships?
- I’m sure none of us like to think of ourselves as controlling, coercive, or manipulative. Yet, in our relationships, how do we try to get what we want...or “help” others towards what’s “best for them” (out of love, of course)...or try to manage/manufacture results/outcomes? How do you go about maintaining proper and healthy boundaries in your relationships?
- When have you been disappointed with prayer (or more accurately, disappointed with God for not responding to your prayers as hoped/expected)?
- If you are willing to share with the group, what is something you are persistently (perhaps agonizingly) praying about?
- Who do you share a table with that you wouldn’t otherwise except for the presence and example of Christ in your life? What role has a shared table played in your spiritual/faith development?
- “Persistence” is generally not easy or fun. (Other words that persistence brings to mind are perseverance, endurance, resilience, discipline.) In a culture like ours that values speed, ease, instant gratification, etc., persistence is not often valued. But according to Jesus, it’s a key to a life of faith and experiencing the Kingdom of God. How are you working on developing persistence in your life?
- How has your understanding and practice of prayer changed over the years? How have you changed through the practice of prayer?
- The “Golden Rule” seems so simple. Why do you think we’re so challenged to consistently live by it? How, or in what ways, are you challenged to fulfill/obey it?

Soul Training Exercise ~ Open up your home and/or share a table/meal

This week's invitation is quite simple. Invite someone over, whom you've not had over before, and share a table/meal with them. (It doesn't have to be a meal...having coffee or dessert will suffice...just make it with someone you've never done so with before, and sit with them for a bit and converse.)

If opening your home is too much or not feasible, then perhaps meet them for coffee or a meal out. (Lots of places have tables 😊)

Perhaps pray about who God might have you approach and invite.

Remember, sharing table was a regular and powerful practice of Jesus...because people/relationship are important. May we develop a similar open posture toward people.