

You Will Receive
Matthew 7:7-14

Ask, and it shall be given unto you. Are these words comforting or confusing to you today? After all, we know good and well that we don't get everything we ask God for. Maybe you prayed for a certain outcome to the recent election only to be disappointed. Maybe you prayed earnestly for a loved one to recover from sickness, but God took him or her to be with Jesus. You have your own list of unanswered prayers, and I have mine, and they are painfully engraved on our consciousness.

And Satan often points to these lists, mocking us for our faith. "Why do you believe in God? He doesn't answer your pitiful little prayers in spite of all His promises. You can't believe what He says." That's what Satan says to us. So, how will we answer him?

Perhaps Jesus' little brother James can be of some help here. For in chapter 4 of his epistle, James points out that "ye have not because ye ask not." Can that be right? Surely we have asked God for our heart's desires, earnestly, on our knees, time and time again?

Perhaps so, but let's go a step further. Could it be that we have asked without really asking? For what does it really mean to ask for something? It necessarily involves abandoning the attempt to do that thing for ourselves, right? Asking means admitting that you need someone else to do for you what you cannot do for yourself. True asking thus involves a fair amount of humility.

Now, we've all seen the opposite of such humble requests. We've heard the two-year-old's classic line, "I can do it." Oh sure, he can understand the concept of pouring the milk from the jug on the counter, but he can neither reach the counter, nor muster the strength to hold the jug without dropping it. He's sure he can do it, but if he were to try, the only result would be frustration and anger – and probably a lot of spilled milk.

So, when we ask God to solve our problems, have we humbly admitted that we can't do anything about them? When we ask God to forgive our sins, have we humbly confessed that we are powerless to put an end to them? Or do we ever catch ourselves acting more like that over-confident two-year-old, giving our worries and sins to our Lord, only to snatch them back and keep trying to work on them ourselves?

So, maybe James is right after all. Maybe we do not have because we have not really asked – in true humility and trust.

Of course, there is something else besides humility involved in true asking – the true petitioner must be prepared for the possibility that the one who is asked will say “no.” True asking thus leaves the answer up to the one who is asked.

In contrast, demanding will not take no for an answer, and I saw a lot of these kinds of demands back when I was teaching at CHA. Cadets in my class would sometimes “ask” if they might go to the restroom with all the courtesy of a masked bandit. And sometimes, without waiting for an answer, they would just march out the door. Can we say that making such demands is really asking for anything?

Or think again about our willful two-year-old. He’s asked mama to pour him that glass of milk from the jug on the counter, but she has told him to wait to have some with supper, which will be on the table in five minutes. If he throws a tantrum after mama tells him “no,” has he really been asking for anything? Or is he simply furious that his demands have not been met?

And so we can see another problem with our requests of God. If we are willing humbly to admit our helplessness, are we also prepared to take “no” for an answer? And when God does not give us what we want when we want it, do we trust Him enough to accept His sovereign will, or do we fall into anger, or even bitterness? No matter what we say to God in prayer, are we really trying to impose our own desires upon Him?

No, asking is an act of humility, while demanding is an act of pride. Demanding assumes rights and asserts merit, while asking makes no assumptions, leaving the disposition of the request up to the one who is asked. So, do we not have because we do not ask?

We might ask the same question about seeking. Like asking, true seeking is primarily an act of humility. When one seeks, he admits that he does not have something that he needs – after all, you don’t seek what you already have. Perhaps the seeker has lost something he owns. Or perhaps he has simply lost his way. But seeking always involves acknowledging some sort of lack – lack of possessions, lack of knowledge or lack of direction.

Again, we can see this most clearly in contrast. When Daniel Boone was once asked if he had ever lost his way, he was said to have replied, “I can’t say I was ever lost, but I was bewildered once for three days.” And how many modern men have followed his example, refusing to ask for directions because they don’t want to admit they don’t know their way? No, the effective seeker knows that he seeks and is not ashamed to admit his ignorance or his need for help or guidance.

He therefore stands in contrast with the one who simply sees the broad path and the wide gate and assumes that is the right one to take. There is no seeking involved in following the

crowd down the easy road. No hard questions need be asked, and no assumptions need be challenged. Everything is easy to understand and everything is obvious – there's no need to seek anything when you're drifting downstream with the culture.

But if the true petitioner is ready to admit his helplessness and willing to take no for answer, then the true seeker is ready to abandon his current course when the true way is pointed out to him. The true seeker is not attached to or insistent upon his current path, and if he finds that he needs to retrace his steps, he will be glad to do it.

Just so, Jesus says that if we seek the kingdom of God we will find it. So, have we really sought to be governed by Jesus our King? Or have we placed our trust in earthly rulers to make our lives safe and prosperous? Have we sought to obey Jesus' laws, or have we tried to determine for ourselves what is right and wrong? Have we sought God's will or have we been more interested in our own desires? Are we prepared for the Word of God to shake up our world, to change our assumptions, to alter our course, or do we hear its commands and yet continue our easy amble down the broad path, following the crowd?

Yes, Jesus urges us to ask and to seek, but also to knock. And He promises that if we knock, the door will be opened to us. Now, just like asking and seeking, knocking is an expression of humility. After all, the thief does not knock at the door. He simply breaks in and takes what he wants. Likewise, the householder does not knock on his own door, because he knows that he has every right to be inside.

The one who knocks thus admits that he is an outsider, that he does not have a right to barge in. His knock announces his presence, but also confesses that it is up to the householder if he wants to answer the door. A knock is therefore a humble request for entry, nothing more or less.

And, just like asking and seeking, a knock also acknowledges helplessness. After all, someone who has a key to the house does need not knock on the door. A knock admits the need for someone inside to come and open it.

But if one who knocks is just as humble and helpless as the one who truly asks or seeks, knocking also has a relational element. For when we knock, we are wanting someone to open the door, and thus to remove a barrier that stands between us. When we knock, we hope someone will hear us and respond to our desire to come in and be with him or her. In the same way, our prayers should always involve a desire, not only for God to give us what we request, and not only to show us the way we seek, but to be with us, to comfort us not only with His gifts and graces but with His very presence.

But is that really what we want? For let's think again about that list of unanswered prayers for ourselves or for our loved ones, many of them urgent, and all of them close to our hearts. What if God were to say, "You can have what you ask for, you can have what you seek, but only if the door between us remains closed?" What if you thus had to choose between the gifts and the Giver, between the creation and the Creator? Would you settle for God's stuff, or would you keep on knocking until God opened the door so you could be with Him?

Yes, Jesus tells us to ask, to seek, and to knock. So why have our cries to God so often gone unanswered? Why have we so often sought His peace and comfort to no avail? Why have we hammered on the doors of heaven until our knuckles are bruised and raw? Perhaps in our demanding, self-confident, self-sufficient pride we have not really been asking, seeking, or knocking at all.

But what if we were truly to humble ourselves before God our Father? What if we were to admit our helplessness, trusting Him to provide for us in His way and in His time? What if we were to stop making demands of God and be satisfied simply to be in His presence? Then we would be truly asking, seeking, and knocking. And then we could be assured that God will answer our prayers.

And make no mistake – Jesus promises that our Heavenly Father will give us what we need, in exactly the same way that any loving parent would. After all, Jesus reminds us that none of us would ever give a child a snake if he were to ask for a fish, even though they both have scales. A human parent would never give a hungry child rocks to eat, even if they might have a passing resemblance to dinner rolls.

No, just as children fall asleep on Christmas Eve, confident that the morning will satisfy all their hearts' desires, so great should our confidence be in our heavenly Father. For God is much better than Santa. After all, on many occasions, the toy for which a child longs so greatly and asks for so incessantly turns out to be cheaply made, broken after only a day. But God not only refuses to give us evil things when we have asked for good. Jesus promises that God always gives good things to them that truly ask Him.

So, let's take another look at our desires, at our lists of unanswered prayers. Could it be that some of those things aren't really good for us after all? Could it be that some of the things or situations or relationships we crave might turn our hearts away from God or from other people? Could it be that God hasn't answered some of our prayers because He loves us and knows what is truly best for us and for our loved ones?

And as we truly ask instead of demanding, as we truly seek instead of relying on ourselves, as we truly knock, desiring a closer relationship with God above all things, we are putting our trust more and more in God's wisdom and His providence. And that means our prayers themselves will change, coming more and more into line with God's will, approaching the simplicity of the Lord's own prayer, when we say, "Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. And by the way, give us what we need for today – our daily bread."

But how can we know that God will be so gracious to give us the things for which we ask? How can we know that if we seek we will find the way? How can we know that if we knock, God will open the door to us?

We can have confidence because the One who welcomes us to ask is none other than Bread of Heaven, our greatest need. The One Who calls us to seek is none other than the Way to God. The One Who invites us to knock is none other than the Door of the sheep, the One through Whom all His people go in and out and find pasture.

Yes, Jesus can assure us that we will have everything we need because He is the One who paid His lifeblood for it. Jesus can show us the way into the presence of God because He has risen from the dead and is waiting for us there. Jesus can assure us of a welcome at the door of Heaven because He was forsaken of God in order to provide that welcome. Jesus can assure us of God's love for us because He has loved His people enough to die for all who trust in Him as Savior and bow the knee to Him as Lord.

So, when Jesus says, "Ask, and ye shall receive, seek and ye shall find, knock and the door will be opened," we can trust that He is telling us the truth. So, let's take Him at His word. Let us pray.