

The Golden Rule

The Sermon on the Mount

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Bible Text: Matthew 7

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Our Scripture reading this morning is taken from Matthew's Gospel, Matthew chapter 7. That can be found on page 812 of your Pew Bibles. We will be reading beginning at verse 7, reading through verse 12. Matthew 7, hear now the word of the Lord,

7 "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. 9 Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? 11 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! 12 So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets."

This is the word of the Lord.

Do keep your Bibles open at Matthew 7 in which the Lord Jesus as he nears the end of the Sermon on the Mount, is rounding off the subject that he introduced in verse 1 of this chapter which is on judging others and the conclusion of that argument is actually in verse 12, the last verse we just read there together. What this passage reminds us of is that the Christian life is a balancing act. It's almost as if we live our lives as Christians on a knife edge between two extremes. You fall off one side and you go into legalism; you go off the other side and you're into license. We're regularly trying to balance between falling into bitter pessimism or into unrealistic optimism or maybe we're always in danger of being quick to condemn on the one hand and slow to critique on the other. Or we may fall into the "only the best is good enough for God" mentality on the one hand or on the other side, the "anything goes mentality" on the other. The reality is that Jesus as we've been listening to him preach this sermon, has been using the Semitic form of making absolute statements. We've heard him as he's addressed each of these subjects speaking in totally absolute terms about things which if you listen to one and then you listen to another, you may think were contradicting each other. That's true if you come to a sermon in this church, it's a typical feature of preaching as distinct from perhaps a lecture

or some other form of speech in that when you're expounding a particular passage of Scripture, that passage of Scripture is the Scripture for today and receives all the attention and focus and application and energy of the preacher. You may go away thinking that is the most important part of the Bible that you should ever know and it would be right for you for that Sunday, that is the most important part of the Bible for you to know. You come again next Sunday and guess what? You will leave thinking that is the most important part of the Bible for you to know.

So you don't need to listen to me for 15 years to begin to get a hang of which parts of the Bible are really important to know and you'll find every week, every bit is. You see, part of the plan of living the Christian life is learning that truth is usually more nuanced and more finely balanced than our minds are prepared to concede. Very often the issue is not either/or so much as both/and, that is in proper proportion and with proper understanding. This becomes apparent when you look at the context of the verses we just read. This section is the third of three insights into who God is that the Lord Jesus gives to his disciples. Chapter 5, he talks to them about the kingdom of God, God is King. In chapter 6, he talks to them about the Fatherhood of God, God is the Father of his people. And in this chapter, he talks about the judgment of God. Behind everything he says in this chapter, there is this dreadful in the proper sense of the word, of creating dread in our hearts, the dreadful sense that we all live our eyes under the eye of God and moving inexorably forward to that day of final judgment and Paul applies it to us. He says in verse 1 that we are not to judge harshly. On the other hand, he says in verse 6, we are not to judge naïvely. In other words, here we are and we're on the tightrope again or on the knife edge. We're doing the balancing act between judgmentalism on the one hand and being indiscriminating on the other, between judging as we're told not to do a person motives, a person's intentions, the purposes of a person's heart. Why are we not to judge those? Because we don't know what those are. Only God can read the mind and read the heart. That's beyond our pay grade and therefore we should never question a person's motivation or a person's heart or a person's purpose on the one hand, but on the other hand, we should be discerning and we should observe a person's behavior and a person's actions and we should listen to a person's words. So in verse 6, Paul says, "Don't give what is holy to the dogs." So you have to be able to discern who the dogs are and who the pigs are that Jesus is speaking about. We're on this balancing act.

Now it's into that context as we throw up our hands in horror and we think to ourselves, how ever are we going to do this? How are we to know the difference between when we shouldn't judge harshly and when we shouldn't judge naïvely, believing everything everybody says to us? How do we know what to do when? It's into that context, do you see, before he delivers the punchline about our attitude toward other people in verse 12, that Jesus introduces us to the business of our approach to God in prayer, not just in prayer but primarily in prayer. And he does that because this business of knowing when and how to judge is difficult so therefore we need help. We need to ask for help. We need God's help.

Now, the way this section in verse 7 works in terms of the whole sermon and again I remind you this is a sermon preached by Jesus to real people, the way it works in the

whole sermon is that verse 7 answers to the very first verse in the sermon in which Jesus is describing his own people when he says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." He was defining there in what we call the Beatitudes, he was defining there what a Christian person looks like. He gives these categories and they all belong to the one person. He defines what they are and it begins with this fundamental description of a Christian person: a Christian person is one who understands that when it comes to being in the presence of Almighty God, they have nothing to offer. They have nothing to bring. They have nothing to commend themselves. They have nothing to argue over. They have nothing to offer. They are utterly poverty-stricken in the presence of Almighty God. It doesn't matter whether they are wealthy or poor, talented or not talented, intellectually prominent or intellectually dumb, we all sit in commonality this morning in this room in the presence of Almighty God with nothing whatsoever to offer him of our own, nothing. In fact, God doesn't need anything from you this morning.

The Apostle Paul speaking in Acts 17 makes that very clear, "The God who made the heavens and the earth doesn't need anything." He doesn't need anything. You are not going to add to God something God doesn't have ever. We come poverty-stricken into God's presence and that is the presupposition that lies behind, then, Jesus' now insistence that when we come into the presence of God, we should come asking, seeking and knocking. Now, these words are in perfectly balanced symmetry. They are imperatives. They are each of them emphatic. They are in the present tense. That means we are to keep on asking. We are to keep on seeking. We are to keep on knocking. Ask, seek, knock. He is calling us to perseverance and persistence in the matter of securing help from God for the living of our Christian lives here on earth this side of glory.

Now, you say "Why do I need help?" and my answer is, "Read the Sermon on the Mount." Read it over again. Read it again and again. Read what it demands. It demands poverty of spirit. It demands that you mourn and grieve over your sin. It demands that your heart be pure and single-minded. It demands that you have a non-retaliatory spirit toward those who offend you and hurt you. It requires a life of integrity in which the law of God is not simply something that you take off but is something that is written in your heart and motivates your life. It's because of those reasons that we need help. In this immediate context, I need help to know when I shouldn't pronounce condemnation on somebody. In other words, on the basis of information that is not available to me and what's going on in their head, what's going on in their heart, what their desires and their motives and their purposes were, I cannot base any judgment on those things because that information is not available to me. "Lord, give me wisdom to know when not condemn. Give me wisdom to know when to discern between right and wrong and good and evil. Give me wisdom to discern."

In all of this, you see, you and I need help and what must we do? We must come to God, Jesus says. He makes it categorical. There we are. We are to judge not that we be not judged. We're not to give what is holy to the dogs. What are we to do? We are to ask. We are to ask and seek and knock. What is he saying to us? Two things, I think. First of all, we are to beseech God. We are to beseech God, that is in prayer. He's talking principally about prayer. "Ask and it will be given to you," he says. And what he is saying if I can

summarize it is this: Christians must boldly implore their heavenly Father for help. Christians must boldly ask, he says, and the word he uses there is used in two ways in the ancient world: it's used of a beggar asking for bread; it's used of someone who is involved in a lawsuit, pleading a case before a judge. The Lord Jesus is saying to his people, "When you come into the presence of God, it is not only our right but it is your duty to ask him, to beg of him, to plead with him, to offer your petition as an inferior might offer a petition to a superior in society." You come to God and you realize you are a beggar, you have nothing. There is nothing in your hands. Nothing in my hands, I bring, when I come into the presence of God. I have nothing. I have need. I am all need. "In every area of my life, O God, I am all need. There is nothing, nothing that I have. I need. I need. I need you." And you come to God, you come to God aware of your need, poor in spirit, do you see? That's the presupposition of this passage that a believing person utterly knows their absolute need of God with no self-confidence, no dependence on anything exterior to themselves or any natural ability in themselves. Nothing at all. You come in your need to Almighty God.

You can see this displayed, I think, in a parable Jesus told in Luke 18, the parable we know as the parable of the Pharisee and the publican. The Pharisee comes to talk to God. He comes to God and he says, "O God," he's all dressed up in his finery. He's got his best suit on, his Ralph Lauren jacket and he's got his Brooks Brothers tie. No, it's not Brooks Brothers, it's better than that. And there he is in the presence of God and he's speaking to God, "O God," he says, "I'm sure you're very glad that I'm here today. I'm a Pharisee. I've got loads of money here. I'm going to be putting it in your coffers any moment now. Aren't you pleased how generous I am? Here I am speaking to you. I am a great prayer. I have been commended for my prayers and here I am speaking to you." Do you know if you read the story of the Pharisee and the publican, read it again, the Pharisee never asks for anything from God. He has a lot to say to God but he never asks for anything, why is that? It is because the Pharisee is not conscious that he needs anything. He is not conscious, he is not aware spiritually that he is absolutely undone, that he is absolutely without hope and without God in the world. On the other hand, there is this publican, this man who is the off-scouring of the earth, a tax collector, a sinner and he comes into the temple and it's all ask. He begs the Lord for mercy. He realizes his fundamental problem is a sin problem and he says, "O God, O God, be merciful to me a sinner."

Ask. Seek. There's his other instruction, seek. A very strong word. It means to search or to scour. I remember a number of years ago, a long number of years ago when our two oldest girls were little girls and we were with friends in the forest somewhere in northern Ireland and we'd been going for some hours through the forest on a very brisk forest walk together and the girls with another friend of theirs, three of them, had been dancing around in and out of the trees and so on and playing games and we suddenly became aware that they weren't with us any longer. You say to yourself, some really remarkable things happen to you. I learned how to make illustrations out of life from Donald Gray Barnhouse. He said, "Always note the things that have happened to you in your life. There there for sermon illustrations." Things happen to preachers so that they can tell a story, okay? So they were lost. They really were lost. We spent hours looking for them in the forest shouting on them, going in different directions, trying to find these girls. One of

them actually was at the first service so we did find them in the end. But I want to tell you this: when we were looking for those girls, there was only one thought in our minds, only one thing, it was finding those girls. That was our focused intention. There was nothing else in our mind and that's what this word "seek" means. It means most places, most times, those moments in your life when you come to God and there is something serious, there is an intensifying of these words. Each word is an upward movement here. Asking is one thing, seeking is something else. You seek, you search, you come to God looking for something when there is this overwhelming sense of a need, of a crying need. It is a primary need. It's right at the top of your need agenda. You come to God and you have nothing else to talk about, in a sense, but this need and you come to him with this and you ask him about this thing and you bring this to him and you put it before him and you spread it before him not thinking that he doesn't know but you lay it before him so that he sees your heart.

You ask and you seek and you knock. This word is a word you use for pounding or banging on something. We are to persevere in boldness as those looking for favor. Do you remember the story Jesus told in Luke 11? I don't know if you know this expression that I'm just about to use in American English but I think it translates pretty well. I don't know if you've heard of the neighbor from hell? The neighbor from hell. You can imagine what the neighbor from hell looks like and in Luke chapter 11, Jesus tells the story of the neighbor from hell. Here's a man and he has friends arrive at his home and he has nothing to give them. What's he going to do? Well, this is what he does: it's late at night so he goes next door to his neighbor and he starts knocking on his neighbor's door. No answer. Knock, knock, knock. No answer. Knock knock knock, knock. The neighbor shouts down, "Go away. We're in bed sleeping. Have you seen what time it is?" But the man won't give up. He keeps on pounding until eventually the neighbor gets out of bed, comes down and gives him his bread and says, "I'm going back to bed. Don't knock again tonight," and the neighbor from hell goes away. Jesus tells that story and he says, "That's what happens when you come to God and you've got a burden in your heart and you keep coming. You don't give up. You don't walk away. You be persistent. You desire to obtain favor from God." You come in the language that C. H. Spurgeon used, like an army besieging the new Jerusalem, coming as it were, battering on the doors of the celestial city in order that God would open the doors. Spurgeon used to say that his prayers in his prayer meeting would pray like that as they prayed for the church and for the church services and the preaching of the word. They were, he said, like soldiers at the gates of the holy city, battering down the door for God to open and send out a blessing, so serious were they.

Now, here's what Jesus is telling us to do here. He says, "Ask, seek, knock." Ask like a beggar. Matthew Henry puts it like this, "Those who would be rich in grace must betake themselves to the poor trade of begging and they will find it to be a thriving trade." When you come to God as a beggar, you will find you're in the most productive business of them all because, ask and you will be given. Seek, coming earnestly, deliberately, petitioning the Lord about a specific matter. Knocking, being diligent, persevering, not giving up in prayer. Understanding that God is more ready to give than we are to receive. And so much of what happens in prayer, by the way, is not getting God to change his

mind but getting my heart changed so that my mind is in tune with his mind. James, the apostle says in one place, "You have not because you ask not." We are to beseech God. There is a word to the church. It's very, very easy for a church to rest on its laurels or its reputation or its past and to say, "We're great at this and we're great at that and we're great at the next thing." My dear men and women, we are nothing without God and we receive God's presence if we pray together, if we beseech heaven together, if we ask together.

Beseech God. Believe God. Do you know, there are three commands in this passage and there are six promises attached to those commands. The Lord Jesus wants you to hear the promises, in other words, ask and it will be given. God's answer meets the need. Seek and you will find. Here's the promise, you find it throughout the Old Testament, those who seek the Lord will surely find him. Third, knock and it will be opened to you. The door of mercy is opened by the key of prayer. God is sovereign, why pray? It's because God has ordained that blessings come to his people by the instrumentality of prayer. The Puritans used to say this, "When the Lord is preparing to bless his people, he sets them praying."

We were in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and I didn't know Jesus was born there. Apparently that's the story and there were lots of decorations and there were lots of lovely things and lovely decorations and so forth and so on, brightening up Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and our lives here. We just banned roadkill from this tree, by the way. But in Bethlehem, of course, the very famous movement in Bethlehem was that of the Moravians. I want to tell you a bit about the Moravians. In the 17th century and early 18th century, God began a work. He began it with Jan Hus before the Reformation, actually and by the time we're talking about, the 18th century, it was being led by Count von Zinzendorf who wrote, "Jesus by blood and righteousness," I think, one of our hymns. And there had been a group of Moravian people who had been praying, not the same group but they had been praying for 100 years for one thing, for God to reach the heathen. For God to make the mission of the church reach the world. It didn't start during their time, as it were, but towards the end of their time, George Whitfield came to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, actually, and he built an orphanage there. George Whitfield, the great evangelist, you can see the orphanage. There is no sign up but if you ask me to come with you, I'll show you which of the buildings was the orphanage. And George Whitfield was the best-known man in these colonies and there was a spiritual work of God in these colonies in the 18th century and they were praying that God would reach the nations with the Gospel, those people. They came here to escape the 30 years war in Germany. They settled here and to this continent, people from all over the world, the nations of the world came and they heard the Gospel and from this continent, people left and went to all the nations with the Gospel, they heard the Gospel. That period of prayer was the preliminary to a move of God in the 18th and 19th century that left the 19th century often being described as the century of missions or the Christian Century. Knock and it shall be opened to you. They knocked, the door opened.

Everyone who asks receives and if you ask in faith, this is a promise not just for super saints, not just apostles, not just those who are gifted in public prayer. This is a promise for every believer: ask and you will receive. If you seek, you will find. That is, you'll find

God's favor and if you knock, the door will be opened. Six times Jesus repeats the promise. He is bringing these inducements to bear upon us in order to get us to pray to our heavenly Father. Run through them with your eye quickly. In verse 7, he makes a promise to us. In verse 8, he repeats the promise to us. In verse 9, he illustrates the promise. In verse 10, he illustrates the promise again in case you didn't get the first illustration. In verse 11, he emphasizes the promise. He wants you to know. He wants you, child of God, to know that when you come to your Father in prayer, he wants you to know this, your Father cares for you. Your Father in heaven really, really cares for you. Your Father in heaven cares. He cares for you.

That's what Jesus is emphasizing here. He understands your heart. He knows there are fears in your heart. He knows you easily become discouraged in prayer. He knows the aching heart of those who have prayed and prayed heartfelt prayers with all the strength they could muster and it seems that that prayer wasn't answered and he's responding to that faithless fear that prayer does not work, by piling up again and again for us the promises of God so that we come and we rest on the promises, we build on the promises, we argue the promises. Just as Daniel does when he's praying to God and he says to God, "You know, this is happening but you said... And that is happening but you promised... And this is going on but you, Lord, said in your word..." What is Daniel doing there? He is arguing with God on the basis of God's word. That's an argument you can win because God is always faithful to his word. He keeps his word.

That's why this kind of prayer as John Stott puts it, is based on knowledge, that is knowledge of God's word. How do I know what God's will is? I find it in his word and I find that my heavenly Father therefore does not give that which is not good to his children. Prayer presupposes faith. It humbles itself. Faith comes to God and says, "Not my will but thine be done." Faith says to God like Job, "The Lord gives. The Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." Faith comes to God in prayer and comes with the understanding, "God may take something from me but when I get to glory and I look back, I will know God gave me only what was good." Prayer presupposes desire, that is a desire for the will of God to be done in the kingdom of God to come. This for all of us. Martin Luther, commenting on this very passage, in fact, says this, "He knows," God knows, "that we are timid and shy, that we feel unworthy and unfit to present our needs to God. We think that God is so great and we are so tiny that we dare not pray. That is why Christ wants to lure us away from such timid thoughts, to remove our doubts, to have us go ahead confidently and boldly."

Christians must trust their heavenly Father to answer prayer wisely and graciously. That's the point of those two illustrations that he uses. When we wonder if prayer is really worth it, let's remind ourselves that we are, in fact, children coming to our Father. Only the Lord Jesus could have told us to do this. The eternal Son of God could teach his children, his people, that they are the children of God by gracious adoption and that they, when they come to God, are coming to their Father in heaven. You need to know that. You need to know that when you're holding a dying child in your arms and you're crying to God for mercy for the child and the mercy doesn't come. You need to know the one to whom you were speaking is your loving, heavenly Father and he hasn't stopped loving

you because that child died. You need to know when you're facing financial ruin and you cry to God to avert the disaster and it seems he hasn't averted the disaster and all is lost, that the one to whom you speak is the all wise and all gracious, loving heavenly Father.

Jesus teaches us here that we are coming to God as his children and he uses the illustration of a child going and asking for something to eat from its parent and the parent giving it something to eat and he says, "Do you think God is any worse than the normal, average, run-of-the-mill parent?" He is so much greater. He is so much kinder. He is so much more generous. He is not evil, we are. He is not. So he tells us to expect good things from God when we ask him just as when a child asks for a loaf of bread, the parent does not give him a stone. Even evil human parents don't stoop that far. Our heavenly Father will always give us good things.

What about those prayers then? When the answer seems to be "no"? We may very well find when we get to glory that God's "no" was the greatest blessing in our lives. Well, that's a very hard thing to say, it's a very hard thing to hear but there are certain prayers which God resolutely answers "no" and people have testified, having looked back over their lives, they are able to thank God that he said "no." You know, the Greeks used to say, "Whom the gods would destroy, they answer their prayers." John Calvin reminds us that God does not hear our prayers and answer them as we ask them but he answers them as we would ask them if we were wiser. Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones puts it like this, "Thank God he has not answered all my prayers with a 'yes' but he has given me what I needed even when I didn't know what I needed," and that's a lot of the times, isn't it? That's a lot of the time. The Lord hears our prayers. And you see the context of this, Jesus is saying, "God is the King. God is the Judge, but he's your Father. You are coming to a King, large petitions with you bring, for his grace and power are such none can ever ask too much." Isn't that amazing?

Now you see, it is then that Jesus gives us this little golden rule, "Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for that is the Law and the Prophets." Why does he put it there and not after verse 6? Why does he insert the prayer before he gives this rule? He's now talking about the way we treat other people. Do you see in the prayer what has happened? In the prayer, we have discovered that we are beggars. In the prayer, we have been delivered from our self-absorption. In the prayer, we have being delivered from our love affair with ourselves. And because we have come to God, you notice the way in which Jesus frames this Golden rule. Kant, Confucius, Hillel, framed it in the negative form, "Don't do what you don't want others to do to you." Don't do. That's an easy way. That's just kind of living in a world that forbids action, it's less demanding. Jesus puts it in its positive form, "If you like being loved, love. If you like being heard, hear. If you love being helped, help." There are no limits to what Jesus says. It demands action. It demands you actually take the initiative. It takes taking the initiative to help other people and what prayer does is, you see, prayer releases me from my self-absorption and sets me free to put others first and to do to them what we would like done to us.

Prayer keeps me in the grace of God, you see. Prayer keeps me where I really am. It keeps me humble. It keeps me dependent. It keeps me trusting. Prayer is the key. Brothers and sisters, I have a great burden that our church should become more of a praying community of people. We need to keep short accounts with God. We need to keep close to God. The closer we get to God, the closer we'll be to each other. The closer we get to God, the more we'll see each other in the light of his grace. Ask. Seek. Knock.

Let's pray together.

Father, we pray that we might know your grace, your help in our heart so that we are freed from the mastery of our own inclinations and our own sin, free to love others and serve them in your name. We pray this in Jesus' strong name. Amen.