

Matthew 7:1-12
God's Generosity and the Golden Rule

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The text this morning about “ask, seek, knock” is found both in the gospel of Matthew and in the gospel of Luke. There is a lot that’s similar about the texts: both say “ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.” Then both Matthew and Luke offer two examples. Matthew chooses the examples of a child asking for bread and asking for a fish and the response of the father. Luke chooses the examples of a child asking for a fish and asking for an egg and the response of the father. Then both Matthew and Luke remind us how our Father loves to give his children gifts – Matthew describes it as “good things” and Luke describes it as “the Holy Spirit”.

But there is one important distinction concerning this teaching in the two gospel accounts and that is the context or location of the teaching. Luke places this text immediately after Jesus’ teaching on prayer. In Luke 11, Jesus teaches us the Lord’s prayer. Then Luke places this text about “ask, seek knock” right after the Lord’s prayer. This seems to be quite logical and makes a lot of sense. After all, isn’t Jesus teaching us about prayer when Jesus tells us to ask, to seek, and to knock? Isn’t Jesus teaching us about prayer when he says “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!”

When we look at Matthew’s gospel, we notice that Jesus’ teaching about ask, seek, knock, is not part of Jesus’ teaching on prayer but is actually part of his teaching on judgment. In Matthew’s gospel, the Lord’s prayer comes at the beginning of chapter 6 and the part about ask, seek, knock comes towards the middle of chapter 7, many paragraphs and verses later. Why does Matthew place this teaching, teaching which seems to be about prayer, right after teaching on judgment

and generosity? And why does Matthew add this – “therefore, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and Prophets” at the end of this passage when Luke omits it altogether? What does this golden rule have to do with prayer or with judgment? We know that the gospel writers have chosen their words and their structure carefully, intentionally, purposefully. So there must be good reason for this order.

As Pastor Greg mentioned last week, Matthew 7:1-12 can be read and seen as a whole unit. So I want to suggest to you this morning that the answer to those questions – why Matthew placed this teaching on “ask, seek, knock” after teaching on judgment and why Matthew added the golden rule as part of “ask, seek, knock” - can be found in verse 12. This is the verse that holds together Jesus’ entire teaching of Matthew 7:1-11. Indeed, there is where we find Jesus fulfilling the law and prophets; for he never came to abolish the law and prophets but to fulfill them. The golden rule is the fulfillment of the law and prophets’ teaching. Let me first explain what is so extraordinary about the golden rule then I’ll show why and how that connects Jesus’ teaching on “ask, seek, knock” with his teaching on judgment.

The golden rule has often been regarded as the summation of Christian ethics. Scholars consider this one verse like Mount Everest in the sermon on the mount – the highest point of his teaching. In the ancient world and in the first century, it was common practice to ask a rabbi or sage or teacher what to do, and expect a short one sentence answer. These days we ask google or Wikipedia or Siri or Alexa what to do and we expect not a sentence but an emoji in response! So it was not uncommon for people to ask “what is the most important ethical teaching?” And here we get Jesus’ response: do to others as you would have them do to you.

Is Jesus' golden rule actually unusual? Or extraordinary? Or radical? So much of his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is, to use Bryce's words from his sermon in the summer, about an upside-down Kingdom. It's about a reordering, a re-structuring, a different perspective. So does the golden rule really offer us something new?

I'm sure many of you have seen posters in community centres or public spaces featuring the golden rule of each religion. In fact, I attended the Week of Christian Unity service at Vanier School in January and during the service, there was projected on the screen an image of the golden rule as described in over a dozen religions. Taosim says "regard your neighbour's gain as your own gain, and your neighbour's loss as your own loss". Hinduism says "do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you." Jesus teaches "Do to others as you would have them do to you".

Is not Jesus telling us the exact same thing that other great teachers, philosophers, thinkers, and ethicists have said? Consider closely and carefully what others have said before Jesus. Confucius was once asked what one word serves as a rule of practice for all of life. Confucius replied "Reciprocity. What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others." There are some lines in the Buddhist hymns of faith which appear to be very close to Jesus' teaching: "All men tremble at the rod, all men fear death; putting oneself in the place of others, kill not, nor cause to kill. All men tremble at the rod, unto all men life is dear; doing as one would be done by, kill not nor cause to kill." We find similar teaching among the Greek and Roman philosophers. Socrates says "Do not do to others the things which make you angry when you experience them at the hands of other people". Epictetus condemned slavery on the principle "what you avoid suffering

yourselves, seek not to inflict upon others.” The Stoics said this “what you do not wish to be done to you, do not do to anyone else.” And then there is the story that includes the Jewish philosophers and ethicists Shammai and Hillel. As the story goes, a Gentile went to rabbi Shammai and said “I’m prepared to be received as a convert on the condition you teach me the whole law while I’m standing on one foot”. Shammai sent him away and he went to the Jewish rabbi Hillel. Hillel responded “what is hateful to yourself do to no other. That is the whole law, and the rest is commentary. Go and learn.” In the intertestamental period – the 400 years between the Old and New Testament – there is a book called the Book of Tobit. In it, the aged Tobias teaches his son all that is needed to know for life. Tobias says “What you yourself hate, to no one do”.

Many teachers, philosophers, and rabbis have said “do not do to others what you would not have them do to you”. So are Jesus’s words really unique and new? Jesus is the first voice to say “Do to others what you would have them do to you”.

When we look closely at the other voices, we notice “do not do to others what you would not have them do to you” is in the negative and passive form. The negative form says “don’t”. The passive form says “don’t do”, it means to refrain from doing what you don’t want done to yourself. This is about not doing activities that would hurt someone. This is about not injuring someone. This is about avoiding doing something. For many of us this is a simple, common-sense command to follow – we can refrain from doing or saying something hurtful.

But Jesus says “do to others what you would have them do to you”. He calls us to something different, he calls us to a different ethical standard. Jesus changes the negative to the positive; he changes it from the passive to the active. And in doing so, Jesus tells us that this sums up the entire law and prophets. This sums up all of God’s revelation of what it means to live in this world. It sums up God’s righteousness. How you want people to treat you, so treat them.

What Jesus says here is that we are to consult ourselves, our own interests, and our own feelings when we decide how to treat others. We don’t need to seek experts who create a multitude of laws for every situation we might face. Rather, the question becomes how would I like to be treated in this situation? Jesus says - then go and do likewise to another. How should I treat my brother or sister? Well, how would I want to be treated as a sister? How should I treat my spouse? Well, how would I want to be treated? How should I treat my ageing parents? Well, how would I like to be treated when I’m old? How should I treat visitors? Well, how would I like to be treated if I was a visitor? Jesus eliminates ethical confusion and agony and debate by telling us to relate to others out of my own best interest.

Let’s go back to my initial questions at the beginning: why does Matthew place Jesus’ teaching on “ask, seek, knock” after teaching on judgment? And why does Matthew add the golden rule in this section? Well, look at how verse 12 begins. It says “therefore”, which is sometimes translated “so” in our Bibles. “Therefore” is our language clue that this sentence is here precisely because of what came before. Therefore links together what Jesus said before. The Golden rule holds together Jesus’s teaching in Matthew 7:1-11. If the Golden rule is about treating others how we want to be treated, then Matthew 7:1-11 gives us examples of how to treat others.

First, Pastor Greg helped us to understand last week that Matthew 7:1-5 is about being generous towards others, especially in conflict. In Jesus' teaching on judgment, Jesus doesn't tell us to ignore making value decisions or to withhold critical thought. Indeed, it seems that the entire Sermon on the Mount is Jesus teaching us to think critically, to choose wisely: Jesus tells us to choose humility, to choose chastity, to choose secrecy, to choose truth in our speech, to choose love, to choose treasures in heaven. So we are to think critically, to make judgments. Jesus is teaching us that when we're in conflict, we should be generous to the other, to not condemn.

Second, we get to a most peculiar text in verse 6: "Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under food and turn and maul you." This is related to Proverbs 9:7-8 which is about pointing out to our brothers and sisters when they're starting to make wrong decisions and choices; when they are beginning to sin and fall away from God. Or look at 2 Peter 2 where Peter speaks about believers who have turned away from God. 2 Peter 2:21-22 says this: "For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than, after knowing it, to turn back from the holy commandment that was passed on to them. It has happened to them according to the true proverb, 'The dog turns back to its own vomit' and 'the swine is washed only to wallow in the mud'". Recall that Jesus does instruct us in Matthew 7:5 that we are to take the speck out of our neighbour's eye. We are to point out when our brother or sister has forgotten what is holy and sacred. Jesus is teaching us that when our brother or sister has sinned, we are to point it out to them so they can be brought back.

Then we get to the third example of how to treat others. Jesus says “ask, seek, knock”. Jesus teaches us that the best way to avoid judging others, to avoid being critical of others is to ask, seek, and knock. The most redemptive way to avoid a critical spirit, a spirit of condemnation and judgment is to pray.

There are two things I want to point out about the language structure of verses 7-11. First, Jesus uses the present imperative: It’s a command to always do or to go on doing. In these verses, it means to go on asking, to go on seeking, to go on knocking. It conveys an image of consistency, of continual action.

Second, there are no qualifiers in Jesus’ commands. Jesus doesn’t say “if, then”. Jesus simply says “Go on asking and go on receiving; go on seeking and go on finding; go on knocking and go on having doors opened.” In other words, each person who is asking is also receiving. Each person who is seeking is also finding. Each person who is knocking is also having a door opened.

Does this mean that whatever I ask for will be given to me? Whatever I seek will be found? And whatever door I knock on will be opened? I want an A on my exam or essay. I want Canada to win gold. I want a new bike. I want a new job. I want my sister to be healed fully.

Is this really what Jesus is instructing us on prayer, that whatever we ask for will be given to us? We all know of many times where our prayers were not answered in the ways we desired. We prayed to get a job only to find out we weren’t successful in the interview. We prayed for healing only to find out the sickness and illness worsened. We prayed for a baby only to have a

miscarriage. We prayed for reconciliation only to experience separation. We conclude that God has failed to give to those who asked him.

In the New Testament, we read passages like John 14:13 “I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son”. Or James 1:5 “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you”.

But there are also Old and New Testament texts which remind us that sometimes God does not respond to our petitions, our pleas, our requests with affirmation, with what we want. David cries out in agony in Psalm 22 “O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, and am not silent.” The Psalmist writes in Psalm 42 that God has forgotten them: “I say to God my rock “Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?” Or consider the prophet Jonah’s great anger and displeasure that God did not answer his prayer the way he wanted. Paul the Apostle writes to the Corinthians about his petition to the Lord that was denied three times.

The Bible, taken as a whole, helps us understand that our petitions, requests, and prayers are not always answered with a ‘yes’. This passage on ask, seek, knock, is not a promise that we will receive whatever we pray for.

We need to remember the context of Jesus’ teaching. And when we consider his teaching on prayer in the context of his passage on judgment and generosity and the golden rule, we’ll notice two things. First, Jesus tells us that God will provide wisdom and discernment to judge and

discern appropriately. In the context of conflict, when we ask God for wisdom, when we ask God for generosity, He will grant it.

Secondly, the most redemptive way to avoid a spirit of judgment, a spirit of criticism is to pray for the person we want to judge. There is something most miraculous that happens in the depths of our souls and being when we pray for someone who has wronged us. I'm not speaking of prayers of vengeance or spite but I'm speaking of intercessory prayers. When we intercede for those who have wronged us, who have hurt us, those with whom we are in disagreement, we experience a transformation. The Holy Spirit makes us into more generous people. The next time you and your spouse are in conflict; or you and your child; or you and a colleague are in conflict; try praying for that person. And notice as God gives you wisdom and generosity and love.

When we pray for another, intercede on their behalf, we experience a change or transformation because we are encountering our good Father, our generous Heavenly Father who loves to give us good things. He loves to give us wisdom, generosity, love.

Therefore, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

When you have wronged someone, when you have hurt someone, when you are in conflict with someone, how would you like to be treated? I would like to be treated with generosity. I don't want someone to condemn or judge me wrongly. I would like someone to point out my wrong so

I can come back to the Father. I would like someone to intercede and pray for me so that I may encounter the good and generous and gracious Father.

Therefore, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and Prophets.

Amen.