

Introduction

How many of you have dogs at home? How many of you feed them from the table? I do even though I prefer not to because I can't help it. They stare up at me, watching every bite I take, and I know what it means, "**Will you give me some?**" My answer always is, "**Yes, I will.**" Why? It's because when they stare at me, I'm up against one of the fundamental forces of the universe. Jesus identifies what that force is in Matthew 7:7-11. He also explains how it relates to our theme for the month, living prayer. Let's examine what He teaches in this text.

Prayer Is Asking

Verses 7-11 are part of a pericope or paragraph of thought, verses 1-11. Its subject is the best way to influence people for good

Let's start with the synonyms "**ask,**" "**seek,**" and "**knock**" in verses 7-8. The preceding verses make clear that Jesus is talking about requests among people. One asks another to do or give something. He gives an example in verses 9-10. A hungry son asks his father for food. There are of course many other examples. A person asks his neighbor to take him to work because his car broke down. Or a son asks his parents to lend his wife and him the down payment on a home. Verses 7-10 are about people asking people to do or give things.

That thought then leads Jesus naturally to the thought of verse 11. We find the word "**ask**" again but here it's about people asking God. They ask Him to do or give something – for others or them. We call that action of request "**prayer.**" Verse 11 helps us understand what prayer is. Just talking to God isn't prayer. Neither is praising or thanking Him. Don't get me wrong. Those are vital spiritual practices that can and even should accompany prayer. But they aren't prayer. That's because request is at the heart of prayer. It's you and me asking our Father who is in heaven to do or to give something for others or us.

This past week, I asked God to increase my wife's physical energy

and strength, to give me insights for this sermon, to right a wrong in a person's business, to give a person a job, to heal a person's back, and to draw an unsaved husband and wife to Jesus. That is prayer.

The acclaimed British preacher Charles Spurgeon once declared, **"Whether we like it or not, asking is the rule of the kingdom."** He was right and we call that asking **"prayer."**

Asking and Receiving

Now let's go back to verses 7-8 and the actions Jesus mentions there – asking, seeking, and knocking. Those actions, He teaches, have natural consequences and He identifies what they are. Ask – receive. Seek – find. And knock – opened to you. It's obvious what He's talking about here. It's asking and receiving, and He teaches us two things about that.

First, asking and receiving is inherent in every close relationship. Jesus makes just that point in the opening phrase in verse 11. Is there any normal father-son relationship that the son doesn't ask and receive things from the father? No! But it isn't just father-son relationships. It's all close ones. Jill and I, for instance, ask her sister to watch our dogs when we go away for a few days and she does. It's true. Asking and receiving is a joyful and loving way of life for those who cherish each other. According to Jesus, that's how our relationships should work.

That certainly includes the most intimate of those – with God. It's interactive. And a primary component of that interaction is asking and receiving. That makes sense doesn't it? After all, we know that He loves us more than anyone does and is able to do or give whatever we ask. So, we ask Him and receive when we do.

That then is the first thing Jesus teaches us about asking and receiving. It's a joyful and loving way of life for those who cherish each other. It's inherent in every close relationship, especially with God.

Asking Precedes Receiving

He teaches us a second thing. Asking precedes receiving. We

usually don't receive if we don't ask. There are two reasons for that.

First, giving isn't imposing. Notice a critical element in each of the four verses, 7-10. A person receives because he asks. That implies something. Giving isn't imposing. Sometimes, it's good or perhaps even best for a person to receive without asking. But usually it isn't. Under normal circumstances, when a person receives something from us without asking for it, we aren't *giving it to* him as much as we are *imposing it upon* him. We're overriding his will.

A well-intentioned friend of Jesus wanted his neighbor, a nominal Christian, to read Dallas Willard's book *The Divine Conspiracy*. He tried to lend him his copy but he wouldn't take it. So he bought him his own copy and gave it to him. But as his neighbor told me, he hasn't read it and probably never will. That friend of Jesus didn't give. He imposed.

God has given people the leadership over their own lives - the freedom and capacity to decide and do. We should deeply respect that leadership and, with exceptions here and there, not take it away. Knowing that, we give not impose by waiting for the request. Receiving comes after asking. That's the proper way for persons to interact.

Those persons include God and us. People have repeatedly asked me several questions about prayer over the years. One of those is, "**Why pray and ask if God already knows what we need?**" The answer is that no one respects the leadership we have over our lives as much as He does. After all, He gave it to us. So, with exceptions here and there, He gives not imposes. Asking precedes receiving.

Asking Elicits Giving

There's a second reason that asking precedes receiving. It's because asking elicits giving.

Jesus makes that clear in verses 9-10. He pictures a monster here, really. Imagine a father who is unmoved by his hungry child's request for food and doesn't give it even though he has it. It's so rare that Jesus uses it by way of exception to prove the rule. The requests of children

deeply move fathers. They stir them in the depths of their souls. That illustrates one of the fundamental forces of the universe, the power of the request. The very act of asking brings great power to bear on people. This power is so affecting they usually end up doing or giving what is asked. The exceptions, when they don't, only prove the rule.

All of us have felt the power of the request. I do every night at the dinner table when my dogs stare up at me while I'm eating. I feel uncomfortable if I don't give them what they ask. The power of course is even greater when it's people asking. How many times have you and I done or given something we didn't want to just because someone asked? It's many times I'm sure. We've also done this many times. We avoided someone we thought was going to ask us to do or give something. Why? It's because we'd either grant the request and not want to or we'd reject it and feel badly because we did.

The power of the request operates effectively in even the most casual of our relationships – with people we don't know or will never see again. If it operates effectively with them, how much more it does with people we know and with whom we routinely relate. In close relationships, the simple act of asking almost always elicits giving.

With that in mind, look at the words in verse 11, **“how much more will your Father who is in heaven give.”** Jesus states it plainly. The same power of the request that we feel when our children ask us, God feels when we ask Him. He isn't the **“Unmoved Mover”** as some theologians say it. On the contrary, His heart is the most sensitive and tender of all. So, He isn't indifferent to our requests. Far from it, they always move him, stir Him, so that He grants them if it's best.

Before a counseling appointment not long ago, I asked God to be with my mind and mouth so that I'd be competent to counsel. Consider what happened the moment I did. He received my request not just into His mind but into His heart as well. It's an imperfect analogy but I'll use it anyway because Jesus did. God was moved by my request for that just as a father is moved by his hungry son's request for food. In a perfect

way, He felt the power of my request and granted it. I understood and said things in that counseling session that were beyond me.

That illustrates the second reason that asking precedes receiving. It's because asking elicits giving – in all of our relationships, especially with God. The power of the request we feel when our children ask us, He feels, in a perfect way, when we ask Him. He then gives in response. There are limits on His giving of course, just as there are on our giving to our children. We give only when it's good or best and so does He. But the general rule is that asking elicits giving.

Ask God

So, let's pray. Let's ask God to do or give things for others and us. Asking Him should be a pervasive and habitual part of our real lives.

But let's acknowledge something. Many of us are uncomfortable with that. We're genuinely concerned about always asking Him for things. We fear we're being self-centered and perhaps even presumptuous if we do and thus, we don't. We don't ask Him to do or give many of the things that we want Him to do or give. We may be well-intentioned in thinking, feeling, and acting that way, but we're misguided as well.

We fail to grasp something. That something is the goodness of God. Think of His goodness in terms of what He wills. Because He's utterly and perfectly good, He always wills the well-being of literally everyone and everything on planet earth. He never wills anything otherwise. Well, that everyone on planet earth includes you and me. When I pray for me, therefore, I'm not praying for me just because I want my well-being. I'm praying for me primarily because He wants my well-being. Or when I pray for others, I'm not praying for them just because I want their well-being. I'm praying for them primarily because He wants their well-being. My well-being and theirs is what He wills. So, I'm praying for what He wills and there's certainly nothing self-centered about that. Grasping that frees us from the fear that we're asking too much. In the end, the goodness of God directs how much we pray. It's **“without ceasing”** to

quote Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:17.

It also directs for what we pray. Last week, Robin talked about praying specifically. Many Christians fret about doing that though because they don't know, they think, what God's will is. That in turn compels them to pray generally, "**God, do or give what you will.**" But we do know what His will is because a twice-used word in verse 11 tells us. It's whatever is "**good.**" When a son is hungry, according to verses 9-10, his father wills to give him what is good, a loaf of bread or a fish, and not what is bad, a stone or snake. Father God does the same, according to verse 11. He always wills what is good for people, not what is bad. So, that's what we ask Him to do or give – what is good.

When I lived in Akron years ago, a man asked our Bible study group to pray that God would give him a wife. But God giving him a wife would have been like a father giving his hungry son a snake. He had some deep psychological issues that would have made life miserable for anyone who married him. So I didn't pray for that. I prayed for what I discerned was good instead. He needed to recognize his issues and then desire and be able to resolve them. That was good and thus, for what I prayed.

The nature of God should guide for what we pray. We find something specific that is good and ask Him to do or give it. Sometimes, there will be more than one good. When there is, we figure out as well as we can which good is "**best**" and ask Him for that. We may be wrong, but that's ok because we know the Holy Spirit straightens out any crooked prayers we pray, Romans 8:26.

Conclusion

Let me close by summing up what I've said today. God's nature, His goodness, should direct how much we pray – without ceasing. It should also direct for what we pray – the specific things we've discerned are good or best. When you and I pray that much and that way, we receive. Asking precedes receiving. Why? It's the power of the request.