

Matt. 7:7-12

Intro:

This passage continues Jesus's instructions on what His followers should do. And like the previous passages, this one also connects what we are to do with the motivations and empowerment that enable us to do them. And likewise, this passage clearly connects these reasons with the character of God. We can be what He commanded us to be, and do what He commanded us to do, because He is the way that He is, and does the things that He does. That is our hope for success in following Jesus's instructions.

And this passage also teaches a key strategy for fulfilling Christ's commands – to recruit God's help and power to do so. This passage applies to seeking and finding help for all parts of life. But in this context, it especially applies to seeking and finding help to live out the instructions of the Sermon on the Mount.

I. Request from God, because He supplies all good things (7-11)

A. Request what you need from God (7-8)

1. Request (from God) and you will receive (7)

This section very clearly and strongly promises God will respond to our requests. There are two dangers we need to avoid when interpreting these passages: 1) thinking they promise more than they do, and 2) thinking they promise less than they do.

It is a mistake to think that these promises turn God into our own private genie. He is not obligated to give us a new Ferrari or to instantly, miraculously zap off those extra pounds just because we asked Him. James 4:1-10 clearly tells why we should not expect an answer to those kinds of selfish prayers, as well as challenging those who would ask those kinds of prayers. The things that God is obligated to give are qualified by His own character and revealed will. And these promises must be understood in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus was describing the kinds of things that we should be pursuing. And later in this passage, Jesus likened God to a good father who gives good gifts. So, this promise is also qualified by God's wisdom in withholding things that are not truly good for us.

But when we start to think about all the ways that these promises are qualified, or when we have personally experienced unanswered prayer, it is easy to fall into the opposite error. We need to realize and remember that God is good enough and powerful enough to give us any good thing that we ask. And therefore, we should boldly and persistently request good things from Him, knowing that He is fully willing and able to fulfill His promises. And if we don't immediately receive a response in the way that we expect, we can be assured that God knows best and is honoring our request by giving us what we need the most. That may mean that God is denying our request for our own good. It may mean that He is answering it in a way that we did not expect, but which is better. Or it may mean that He is answering our request on a different timing than we expect, which is better. But in any case, we are invited to continue to ask in faith, knowing that our Father is good and wise and generous. And He will answer our requests in the best way possible at the right time. This section consists in three parallel pairs of propositions. Each pair reinforces and elaborates on the other two. And each pair consists of two propositions: first, a command to approach God with our needs and desires, and second, a promise that when we do so, God will meet our needs and fulfill our desires.

a Ask and it will be given (7a-b)

1) Ask (7a)

This is a generic word for any kind of request. It could mean a humble request or a demand, depending on the relative authority of the one asking and the one being asked. In our relationship with God, He has all the authority, and we have no right to make any demand of Him. And we should approach Him humbly, as a creature approaching its creator. But at the same time, He has invited us to ask from Him and has revealed Himself to be generous and not at all stingy with answering our requests. He is a good Father Who delights that we would come to Him as the source of all our sustenance. And so, we have good grounds to approach Him with confidence, based on His character, and not on our worthiness or authority.

This proposition does not tell us what to ask for; it just tells us to ask in general. Thus, Jesus left it open for us to ask for anything and everything. Of course, as stated above, this does not mean that anything and everything will necessarily be given. But no limits are given to what we can ask for. However, what we ask for reveals our heart and what we delight in. And so, our requests should be conformed to goals and ethics Jesus taught in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount.

And finally, it is assumed in this context (but not stated) that God is the One to Whom we are addressing our request. Because, He is the One Who is able to answer our requests, no matter what they may be.

2) And it will be given to you (7b)

This is a clear promise from Jesus without qualifications. He meant us to ask from God with the assurance that we would receive what we asked for. As already stated above, this is qualified by the context and the clear statements elsewhere in the New Testament. But here, Jesus made the point that the Father would respond positively to our requests, and therefore, we should bring all our requests to Him with a faith-filled attitude based on His generous character.

b Seek and you will find (7c-d)

1) Seek (7c)

“Seek” is a generic word for attempting to find or attain something. In this context, it is parallel to “ask” and “knock.” So, here it most likely has the connotation of trying to attain something rather than trying to find out where something is located. Jesus has invited, even commanded us to try to attain and experience those good things He had mentioned earlier in the Sermon on the Mount. And this word also has the connotation of putting forth effort to get what we are seeking for. In this context, this means effort to do our part in attaining it, as well as making effort in our intercession for God to provide what we are seeking. We are to do our part wholeheartedly. And we are to seek God wholeheartedly so that He will do His part on our behalf.

Like in 7a, Jesus did not specify what we should seek. He put no limits on what we can pursue in this proposition. But it is implied that the godly pursuits outlined in the Sermon on the Mount are what we should be seeking. And what we seek is a good indication of what we treasure in our hearts (see 6:19-24).

2) And you will find (7d)

This proposition is parallel to 7b (see the comments there). It is the fitting counterpoint to “seek.” It promises that we will attain and experience whatever it was that we were seeking to attain and experience. Jesus did not qualify this promise in this proposition, but it is subject to the qualifications noted above.

c Knock and it will be opened (7e-f)

1) Knock (7e)

“Knock” means to strike a door as a signal to someone inside, so that the door will be opened and you will be able to enter and gain access to whatever is behind the door. It is a request for admittance to some kind of experience. And in that way is similar to “ask” and “seek” above. Again, Jesus did not specify what door we are to knock upon, but that is implied in the larger context. The point is that we are invited and commanded to make the effort to attain those godly things we should want to attain and take the necessary steps to make it happen.

2) And it will be opened to you (7f)

This is parallel to 7b and 7d in that it is a promise of attaining what is sought in the preceding proposition. This is the completion of the metaphor of knocking – that the door will be opened and access will be granted. It is implied that God will somehow be the One to grant access to whatever is knocked upon.

2. Reason: for requesting is a key part of receiving (8)

In one sense, this verse is repeating and reinforcing the message of the previous verse. But part of the emphasis in this verse is on the action of the one asking, receiving and/or knocking. In other words, Jesus stressed that in order to attain what one seeks, it is necessary to make the effort of seeking it out. This verse stresses our part in attaining the lifestyle and blessings described in the Sermon on the Mount. The rest of this section then stresses God’s part – that He is a generous and gracious Father. But before getting to that part, Jesus encouraged His disciples to diligently do their part with the promise that when they did, they would attain what they were striving for. The main focus in this verse is, therefore, on the hope of certain success in our requesting from God. Because, in God’s generosity, all those who put forth the effort to pursue godliness will not find their effort to have been in vain. Rather, Jesus promised that they would get what they wanted. God has ordained that asking, seeking, and knocking are necessary in order to attain. But He has also ordained that asking, seeking, and knocking are guaranteed to attain.

a For everyone asking is receiving (8a)

Jesus used the word “all” to stress the comprehensiveness of this promise. Not just some of the people who ask, but all of the people who ask are receiving. There is a direct correspondence between the asking and receiving. Of course, this is subject to all the qualifications mentioned above. But Jesus stressed the certainty of the response from God to the genuine humble requests of His people.

“Asking” is the same word from 7a. And “receiving” is in the present tense. This signifies either that this is a general, proverbial action, that happens on a regular basis. Or it signifies that in the process of asking, the receiving is immediately in process of happening, even if the delivery is delayed until the appropriate timing.

b And the one seeking is finding (8b)

This proposition is parallel to the previous one and has the same general point. It just echoes the wording of the second of Jesus’s earlier commands – that we should seek, because we will find (7c-d). This proposition does not explicitly say “all” those seeking like the previous proposition. But the way it was stated implies that everyone who does in fact seek will also find. It is, like the previous statement, a clear promise of success when we do our part.

c And it will be opened to the one knocking (8c)

This proposition is parallel to the previous two, corresponding to Jesus’s command to knock, with the promise of having the door opened (7e-f). This also is a clear promise of success when we follow Jesus’s commands in this section.

B. Explanation: God gives good things to those who ask Him (9-11)

This section explains the reason why we should expect to find success when we ask, seek, and knock. We should not expect to be successful because we are so skillful at asking, seeking, and knocking. How hard or skillfully we knock has no bearing on whether the door is opened. And we should not expect to be successful because we are so worthy and deserving to receive what we ask for. The entire Bible makes it very clear that we do not deserve anything from God but wrath. And even if we are more righteous than others, that does not increase our chances of success in receiving. And even the fact that we have requested is not the reason we will receive. It is the means by which we receive, but not the cause of us receiving. The only reason we should expect to receive anything from God is because of God's nature and character. He is generous, gracious, and giving. That is where our hope lies. And that is what guarantees our success. In this section, God is described as a father. He is a good father. It is all because of grace on His part, not because of anything on our part. We are dependent on Him like children. But He is like a good father who provides for his children. He is even better than the best of earthly fathers. That is why we are commanded to request with the guaranteed expectation of receiving. Because God is the Father Who delights to give.

1. All humans know how to give proper gifts when asked (9-10)

In these two verses, Jesus described two hypothetical situations involving sons making a request from their father. And in each case, He suggested an extremely unlikely, even unthinkable response, in order to make a point about how fathers treat their sons. And then in verse 11, He will apply this lesson, using an argument from lesser to greater, to make a point about God.

a Who will give a stone instead of requested bread? (9)

1) Who among you, when your son will ask for bread (9a-b)

a) Or who is someone among you? (9a)

This is a rhetorical question bringing up a hypothetical father, in order to introduce a situation such a father would face in the next proposition, and his expected response in the final proposition in this verse. This is just a set up for the following statements. But Jesus made this personal by asking about "a man among you." He invited His hearers to personally consider how they would respond to the hypothetical situation He was describing.

b) Whom His son will ask for bread (9b)

This is a continuation of the hypothetical situation Jesus began in the preceding proposition. The father introduced in 9a is now described as being confronted with a situation in which his son asks for some bread, presumably because he was hungry. This continues to invite Jesus's hearers to consider how they, as fathers, would respond if their own son would make such a request. And all of this is still just setting the rhetorical situation, leading toward the punchline Jesus will make in the next proposition.

2) He will not give to him a stone? (9c)

This is the punchline of the hypothetical situation Jesus introduced in the earlier part of this verse. Jesus asked the rhetorical question of whether a father, when requested bread from his son, would give him a stone instead. And the obvious answer is "NO!" It is silly to expect that a good father would give his son a stone to eat when he requested bread. Not only does a stone not satisfy the son's hunger, but it is potentially harmful to the son if he tries to eat it in order to satisfy his hunger. This would be a horrible and harmful response for a father to make, and Jesus expected His hearers to reject this possibility as unthinkable. And rightly so. But all of this is setting up for a greater point about God as a greater Father in verse 11. But first, Jesus reinforced this rhetorical setup by giving another example in v. 10.

b Or will give a snake instead of a requested fish? (10)

This verse is parallel to verse 9. Jesus was giving another similar example to the hypothetical situation He described there, in order to reinforce His same point through repetition.

1) Or he will also ask for a fish (10a)

This is parallel to 9a-b, giving a similar situation for repetition and reinforcement. A son may hypothetically make a reasonable request from his father for some food to satisfy his hunger. In this case, the son requested a fish, instead of bread mentioned in the previous verse. This likely reflects the fact that some of Jesus's hearers were farmers, and some were fishermen. And these two foods mentioned were both staples in that land. This, likewise, is setting up for the point made in the following proposition.

2) He will not give to him a snake? (10b)

This is parallel to 9c. It likewise expects a strong negative response. No decent father would give a dangerous serpent to his son when the son requested some food. This would not only not help with the son's hunger, but may even be counterproductive to his health. No sane father would do such a thing. And again, this is all setting up for the comparative point that Jesus will make in verse 11.

2. Your Heavenly Father knows how to give good gifts better than sinful humans (11)

This verse is the application of the hypothetical situation Jesus described in the previous two verses. After establishing how a typical father would respond to a request from his son, Jesus used this agreed-upon truth to say something about how God will answer a request from His children. And the point is that if a human father, who is far from perfect, will give his son a good thing, then God, Who is perfect, will at least do as well as that.

This entire argument takes the form of what is called a "lesser-to-greater" argument. This form of logic argues if something is true of something lesser, with a lesser chance of being true, then it must be true of something greater (greater in the issue being argued), with a greater chance of being true. For example, I could argue: "If I can reach that item on the top shelf, how much more could a 7-foot-tall, professional basketball player reach this item?" This argument is based on the assumption that the basketball player is taller than I am, and therefore, can reach higher than I can. If that is true, then my maximum reaching height is lower than his maximum reach. Anything I can reach, he can reach, and more. And therefore, anything within my reach is logically within his reach.

In His argument, Jesus started with the (correct) assumption that God is greater and more generous than any human father. And He argued that God will therefore be and act more generous than a human father. We can expect God to care more for His children in the way that He answers our requests than a human father. And therefore, we can expect God to answer our requests with good things.

a Even evil people know how to give good gifts (11a-c)

In this argument from lesser to greater, not only does Jesus assume that God is greater than human fathers. He also clearly states that human fathers are lesser than we typically think. Human fathers are selfish and sinful like all humans. And therefore, if even they, selfish as they are, can do this, it is a much greater probability that God can do even greater.

1) Therefore, even though being evil (11a)

This verse begins with the word “therefore,” showing that it is the conclusion, inference, and application from the previous two verses.

Jesus directly called His hearers evil. This word means morally and socially corrupt and immoral – evil and wicked, and therefore morally worthless. Jesus took it for granted that all humans are sinful and fallen. This is the consistent teaching of the entire Bible. See, for example, Gen. 6:5, Psalm 14:1-4, Jer. 17:9, Rom. 3:9-20, 23. By the way, this is another reason why we need to ask from God and seek His righteousness, and not trust in our own righteousness.

And Jesus used the fact of human sinfulness as an adversative argument to heighten the contrast – “Even though this is true about human fathers.” If human fathers are handicapped by their own evil, and they are still able to do good for their sons. That makes the probability that God can do better, because He has no taint of evil whatsoever, even greater. Jesus was highlighting the exaggerated contrast between human fathers and God in order to drive home His point – that God will do so much greater than the minimum generosity shown to be reached by sinful humans in the previous verses.

2) You know how to give good gifts to your children (11b-c)

In this section, Jesus highlighted what human fathers could attain, even though they are evil (as stated in the previous proposition). This is to serve as a contrast in His lesser-to-greater argument with what God can attain.

a) You know (11b)

This proposition is an introduction to the main idea in the next proposition. Jesus stated that they knew, not primarily in the sense of having information, but more in the sense that they had the skill and ability to perform some task. It is “know how” more than “know that.”

b) To give good gifts to your children (11c)

In this proposition, Jesus described what a typical human father knows how to do, and by implication, knows that they should do, and actually does this. Human fathers, as established in verses 9-10, know how to give good gifts to their children, and they actually do give good gifts. Human fathers do not give harmful things when asked for good things. Rather they give good things, as much as in their power to do so. This is the bare minimum that evil, sinful, selfish human fathers typically accomplish. This is set as the standard for the lesser-to-greater contrast. If it is a given that sinful human fathers attain this level of generosity and care to their children, then, Jesus will argue in the next proposition, God will be so much more generous and caring than this.

b How much more will your Father in Heaven give good things to those asking Him!
(11d)

This proposition is the punch line for all of verses 9-11. Jesus has argued from the lesser to the greater. He had established that sinful human fathers give good things to their children when they ask. And here He proved that God is even more inclined to give good things, and therefore, more certain to give good things. God is called our “Father,” showing that He has this kind of caring and providing relationship with His people. But He is not just called our Father. He is called our “Father in the Heavens.” The One Who cares and provides as our Father is also the Sovereign Lord over the entire universe. He is the powerful ruler over all.

This is a contrast of magnitude and degree. Human fathers are inclined to, and successful in, giving good gifts on a finite, sinful, human level. And therefore, we should expect that God is inclined to, and successful in, giving good gifts on an infinite, heavenly, perfect, holy level.

There is no comparison. There is no chance that God will be unable to fulfill the request. There is no chance that God will misunderstand the request. There is no chance that God will lack wisdom and misjudge whether something is a good gift or a bad gift. There is no chance that God will be having a bad day or be grumpy, and withhold some good thing out of spite. There is no chance that God will lack the generosity and gracious will to bless and take care of His children, especially if they are asking for the kind of things Jesus was teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.

Because God is infinitely better and more generous than any human father, we can, and we should, “ask, seek, and knock,” with full assurance that our Heavenly Father will give us good things in response. Our assurance of receiving our request is based on God’s good character and willingness to give, which cannot fail to be magnitudes better than the generosity and character of the best of human fathers. Therefore, we should obey Christ’s command and make our requests to God.

II. Fulfill the Law by treating people the way you want to be treated (12)

This verse is often called “the golden rule.” A similar sentiment had been stated a few times earlier in history. But the earlier statements were always negative – “Don’t do to people what you don’t want done to you.” What made Jesus’s statement memorable and profound was that He turned it around to be a positive statement – “Do for others what you want done for you.” In order to understand what makes this so profound, we need to understand its meaning in its context in the Sermon on the Mount. This verse begins with the word “therefore,” connecting it as an inference and conclusion from what had just been stated. We are to be generous to others because God is generous to us. We *can* be generous to others because God has been generous to us. We should be generous to others in the way that God is generous to us – giving only good things. But in another sense, this verse is the conclusion and application, not just of 7:7-12, but also to all of 5:17-7:12. Jesus began the larger section with a reference to Him coming to fulfill “the Law and the prophets.” And He concluded this verse with “this is the Law and the prophets.”

A. Treat other people in the way you want to be treated (12a-c)
1. In whatever manner you want people to treat you (12a-b)

a Therefore, whatever you wish (12a)

This is an extremely open and broad statement – “whatever” or “as much as” you wish. This is analogous to a genie giving unlimited wishes. Jesus was inviting His hearers to dream big in honestly thinking about what they really wanted. Of course, this is just a setup for the rest of the verse, where He will ask His hearers to do these things for others. And that is why He wanted them to imagine without limits to what they would want. However, this is qualified by the context, as seen in the next proposition.

b That people will do to you (12b)

In this proposition, Jesus qualified our wishing by what other people can do for us. We cannot realistically think that others could make us 12 feet tall or give us the ability to fly. People (including us) are finite and limited in what they can do. Humans cannot solve the problems of poverty and hate (because we are the cause of the problem). Equal outcomes from unequal people is never realistic, and always breed profound injustice when attempted. We should not expect any human to function as our savior. Only Jesus can truly save and satisfy us. Only Jesus can bring true and lasting peace and prosperity. And anyone else who thinks or claims they can is deceived and/or deceiving. We should be realistic about what we and others can do.

But Jesus is still just inviting us to honestly assess how we would like to be treated by other people, in order to give us the standard by which we should treat other people.

Our discernment of what we want from others needs to be filtered by wisdom and Christian ethics. Wives, don't give your husband diamond earrings just because that is what you want. That is not what he wants to receive, and he won't wear them. And if someone asks you for money to buy heroin, or asks you to support their “right” to murder their unborn child, the proper response is a polite but firm “No, because I care for you too much to do that.” We should discern what we want (and therefore what we should do for others) in the same way that God, as our good Father, gives only good gifts. We don't want a rock instead of bread. And therefore, we should give bread, and not a rock.

We should be honest and reasonable about what we would really want for our long-term good, if we were in other people's situations. And that means that we should not settle for the quick fix that makes people temporarily feel good, but does not address the long-term solution to their real deep needs.

And our assessment of what we want others to do for us should be conformed to all that Jesus had previously taught in the Sermon on the Mount. We should not want others to be murderers, liars, adulterers, greedy, anxious, judgmental etc. toward us. We should reasonably want them to treat us the way that Jesus taught people to act in this sermon.

2. In the same way, you also do all things to them (12c)

And in this proposition, Jesus applied the standard He had communicated in the previous two propositions. The very way that we want to be treated by others, in that way, treat others. Having discerned to the best of our wisdom what is really the best in their long-term interests, do that for the people we interact with, for their good.

And this command is positive. We cannot just refrain from murdering people. We must also actively help them to find the fulness of life. It would be relatively easy to just negatively ignore people, and tolerate them when necessary. The older ideas of tolerance were an outgrowth of Christian virtues of freedom. But many current ideas of tolerance amount to nothing more than apathy, in essence thinking “I don’t care about you either way. I don’t care if you do sinful things that ultimately harm you.” But Jesus commanded us to work for the ultimate good of others, even if it may seem intolerant to them for a time. We are called to be loving and righteous, not just inoffensive.

And we can do this because we have an inexhaustible supply for our own needs from our Heavenly Father. We can be gracious and generous to others because He is gracious and generous to us. We can forgive others, because we have been forgiven. We can serve others, because we have been rescued. We can point others to the truth, because He has taken us out of the darkness and into the light. And, as Jesus taught earlier in this sermon, we can refuse to make people victims of our hate, lust, deceitfulness, anxiety, greed, pride, etc. for all of the reasons He clearly communicated earlier in this sermon.

B. For this is the Law and the Prophets (12d)

In this proposition, Jesus stated that “this is the Law and the Prophets.” This brings up two questions and issues for to understand this proposition: What is the referent of the word “this”? And what is the meaning of the word “is”? Most think that this proposition basically means either “this summarizes and explains the Law and prophets” or “this kind of behavior fulfills what the Law and prophets require.”

In 22:37-40, Jesus said that all of the Law and the prophets depend on loving God and loving your neighbor. And Paul said that loving one another fulfills the Law (Rom. 13:8, Gal 5:14). So, it is true in a sense that doing to others what we want to have done is a primary way to fulfill all that the Law and prophets command from us in our relations to others. And the motivation is love. And this love for our neighbors is dependent on our love for God. And our love for God is dependent on His prior love for us, shown in Christ. Jesus has made it very clear that we cannot fulfill the righteous demands of the Law without the new life from God and the presence of His Kingdom in our midst. So, we should “ask, seek, and knock” for the power to love one another, and so fulfill all that the Law demands.

However, there is a danger in too simplistically equating loving others with fulfilling all the Law’s demands – that what it looks like to love others can remain undefined and nebulous. We too easily substitute sentimental or twisted definitions of love that come more from our fallenness than from God’s standards of love. So, loving fulfills the Law only to the extent that our love is conformed to the standard of genuine love revealed by God.

And, as mentioned earlier, this verse is not just a summary application of 7:7-12, but it is a summary application of all of 5:17-7:12. The word “this” in this verse probably refers to all of the larger section, which is the way that Jesus came to fulfill the Law and the prophets, and the way that we can participate in this fulfillment in our own lives by His gracious empowerment. We can (for instance) fulfill the law prohibiting murder by being so changed by Christ that we no longer hate our enemies, but rather love them, and pray for them, and seek their good. We can (for instance) fulfill the commands to love God by storing all our treasure in Heaven and seeking first His Kingdom and righteousness. Jesus came to bring about the ultimate goal of all the Old Testament revelation. And He has done this, and is continuing to do this in the lives of His people as they are changed by Him and into His image in all the ways described in the Sermon on the Mount up to this point. And so, all that He has taught so far in this sermon is the ultimate point of the Law and the prophets. And all that He has taught so far defines what genuine love for God and others is like.