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Matthew 7:7 - 7:12



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg discusses Matthew 7:7-12, emphasizing the importance of praying according to God's will. He notes that asking is a condition for receiving, and states that prayer is not a magic wand to be used for every circumstance. Gregg concludes that the Sermon on the Mount amplifies the principle of loving others as oneself, which is not to be followed in a legalistic fashion.

Transcript

Let's turn now to Matthew chapter 7, and I'd like to read verses 7 through 11 initially here, and then I hope we can take verse 12 today as well. But in Matthew 7, verses 7 through 11, Jesus said, Now, this is obviously a passage that has something to do with prayer, because he's talking about asking God for things. He says, Ask and you'll get it.

Seek and you'll find it. Knock and it'll be open to you. And therefore, it is one of those passages in the Scripture that assures us that prayer changes things.

You know, there are people who deny that prayer changes anything. There are people who think that everything has been pre-arranged and preordained, and things will happen exactly as they were preordained to happen. And really, we are not real players in the drama of history in the sense of having any causative role of causing effects in any way, but that we are just really kind of pawns on the checkerboard or chessboard, and that all things are just moving according to a prearranged plan.

Now, those who believe such things often have difficulty explaining what role prayer or work or any other kind of activity has in the life of the believer, because if God is foreordained that something is going to happen, who am I to pray that something will happen? On the one hand, I may be praying against God's will, in which case my prayers were counterproductive, because God's determined that something's going to happen, and I'm praying for something else. Or, if I'm even praying for the thing that is determined to happen, why pray for it if it's already going to happen? This is the way many people think, and it makes it difficult for some, as they believe that prayer doesn't change anything in particular, because everything's already determined. A lot of people

don't pray much.

They may pray out of duty, but they don't pray with any faith that anything will happen, because, you know, it doesn't seem like there's any room for my prayers to change things. And some people who take this approach have said, well, it's not so much that prayer changes anything outside of itself, but it changes you. People say, you know, it has a sort of a therapeutic effect on you.

You've got trials. You've got worries. You go to the Lord in prayer.

You unburden your heart. You cast your cares upon Him, and you are relieved. And that's really what prayer is all about, they say.

Now, to my mind, that is not a very good explanation, first of all, because if everything is ordained by God, then even my moods must be ordained by God. Everything's ordained by God, and if I change my mood by praying, or if I'm encouraged by praying, that is something that was changed. And if that can be changed, why can't other things be changed? Why can't prayer affect other things as well as me? If everything is foreordained, and if that's an argument against praying, because praying isn't going to change anything, then isn't my mood also one of those things that's foreordained, and therefore it doesn't change that either? That's one of the big problems of this explanation.

It simply is inconsistent with its own presuppositions. But another problem is it's inconsistent with Scripture. The Scripture plainly teaches that when you pray, things change.

James said in James chapter 2, excuse me, James chapter 4, he said, you have not because you do not ask. Now, isn't that a clear statement that if you would ask, you would have it, but you don't have it because you didn't ask. Very clearly, asking is a condition for receiving some things.

And if you don't ask, you won't receive those things. That is what the Bible teaches. And it clearly shows that if we ask for a thing, it will change the course of events according to what we ask.

Now, Jesus in many other places said, if you ask anything in my name, I will do it, it will be done for you, and so forth, which indicates that we are not supposed to look at prayer as a mere therapeutic to our souls to bring relief to our worry and anxiety. Although, by the way, prayer is supposed to have that effect as well because it says in Philippians chapter 4 that if we cast all our care, well, what it says in Philippians chapter 4 is that we should not be anxious for anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, we make our requests known to God and the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. So, it's clear that

when we pray, it is supposed to be one of those things that imparts the peace of God to us.

And that is, of course, we could say a therapeutic to the soul. But more often, the Bible teaches not what prayer does for me in terms of making me feel better, but it tells me what it does in terms of events. When I ask for a thing, Jesus encourages me to expect that that thing will occur.

And therefore, prayer is, as the Bible teaches it, is supposed to change things, change circumstances. Now, on the other extreme, besides those who think that prayer doesn't change anything, there are those who believe that prayer changes everything. There are some people who think that God does nothing except through prayer.

Now, that may be true. I think it was Wesley who had that idea, and it may be true, but we don't have any biblical statement that demonstrates that to be true. It is possible that nothing is accomplished in the world except through prayer, but we can't really say from any scriptural basis that we could show that to be so.

But I'm concerned more about people who think that prayer is sort of a magic wand that God has given us to wave over every circumstance, and when it has been done, everything is supposed to come about as we asked. Now, verses like the ones we're reading right now sometimes encourage that idea, that whatever you want, it'll change if you want it to, as long as you ask. There are people who believe that you simply have to say what you want, and pray for it, and confess it, and it'll happen, as if you are the one who's sovereign in the universe, and that God is simply your servant.

All you have to do is give him your command, and your wish is his command, as it were, and he has to do the thing that you say. Now, I can understand how verses like that which we're reading here might, initially on a shallow reading, give that impression, because Jesus said, Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find.

Knock, and it will be opened to you. And if that isn't enough, he expands on it, and the next verse says, For everyone who asks, receives. And he who seeks, finds.

And to him who knocks, it will be opened. Now, it sounds like he's saying, without exception. You ask, and you'll get it.

And that is one of those statements of Scripture, about prayer, that encourages this idea that whatever you pray for, if you have enough faith, etc., you will get it. However, we need to take this in context, and there's several contexts of every passage. Every verse in the Bible has several contexts.

It has its immediate context, which is like itself, and the verses before and after it. Then there is the larger context of where it fits into the whole teaching of the book, or the teaching of the person who's giving it, like Paul. A statement in Paul can be interpreted

in terms of Paul's other writings.

A statement by Jesus has to be interpreted in terms of his other statements. And then, of course, you've got the context of the whole Bible, the largest context of all. And it happens that the subject of prayer is one that is discussed throughout the whole Bible, because prayer is one of the key things in a relationship with God.

And the entire Bible is about man's relationship with God, and prayer is our communion with God. And therefore, the Bible speaks about prayer from Genesis through Revelation. And there's a great deal of teaching on it.

And as with many other things, we cannot get the whole counsel of God on a subject from one verse only. We need to take the context, and we need to see what the Bible teaches on it elsewhere. For example, in 1 John 5.14, it says, This is the confidence that we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.

And if we know that he hears us, we know that we have the petitions that we desire of him. Now, that's part of the teaching of the Scripture on prayer, that if we ask anything according to his will, that is to say, our prayers are supposed to be directed toward his will. Remember when Jesus taught his disciples to pray? He said, Pray, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

It is God's will that we're praying for, not something else. And if we pray for things that are not his will, then there is the suggestion that the prayer may not be answered as we ask it. Now, God may answer prayers that are not ideal, but he is not obligated to.

The teaching of Scripture is that we can be confident that he will answer prayers that are prayers according to his will. Also, the Scripture teaches, over in James chapter 4, that prayers can be denied for another reason, and that is that they are poorly motivated. In the same passage in James 4.2 where it says, You have not because you ask not, he then says, You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss that you may consume it on your lusts.

That is, you ask for the wrong reasons, for the wrong motives. It is possible to be denied your request because of your motives. Now, you see, all of these qualifiers are not found in one place, and therefore when you read, Everyone who asks receives, it sounds as if that's the whole counsel of God on the subject, but it is not.

There's more that God has said on the subject elsewhere. Now, even in the immediate context here, there is more to regulate this absolutist idea about prayer, because Jesus illustrates what he means in verses 9, 10, and 11. He says, What man is there among you, who, if his son asked for bread, will he give him a stone? If he asked for a fish, will he give him a serpent? And if you then being evil, that is, all people are in fact evil, and therefore even those to whom he is speaking must assume that they are not perfect,

they are evil, yet they know how to give good gifts to their children.

He says, How much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him? Now, did you notice there's some qualifiers here? When Jesus says, Everyone who asks receives, he then follows up like this, Your heavenly Father will give good things to those who ask him. You know, twice in the book of Psalms, we're told that God will not withhold any good thing from those who fear him, his people, he does not withhold any good thing. Now, God has withheld many things from me, and I imagine he's withheld many things from you.

There are no doubt things you truly and strongly desired and even prayed for, and God withheld them. But we have the assurance of Christ and of the other scriptures that God will not withhold any good thing from those who fear him and who ask him. And therefore, if you asked and did not receive, and if you were asking with good motives, and you had faith and so forth, the thing you asked for may not have been good for you.

Remember, God knows better than you do what's good for you. In the illustration he gives of a child asking his father for bread or for a fish, obviously this is a case where a child is hungry. It is in the father's interest to feed his children.

He wants his children to eat. Food is a good thing for hungry children. And therefore, when they ask for a fish, they will get a fish, or at least something equivalent.

They won't get a serpent. If they ask for bread, they'll get bread. Or if bread is not what's on hand, they'll get something equivalent.

They will not get a stone. The idea here is that the persons asking are people with legitimate requests for that which is really good. A hungry person needs food.

It's good to give that to them. There are some things that children might ask for that aren't good. What if the child asked for a stone to eat or asked for a serpent? Well, the father would probably deny that request.

Jesus does not raise that as a possibility because that would not illustrate the point he wants to make. He is not trying to say that the father will give you anything you selfishly or foolishly ask for. If a toddler wants to play with razor blades, the parent may deny him.

And this is not because the parent is a bad parent, but because the parent is a good parent. There are things that children sometimes want for themselves that are not good things. And Jesus' statement here is that your father who is in heaven will give good things to those who ask him.

That is the qualifier in this passage. Now, what kind of things are good things? Well, necessary things. The apostle Paul told Timothy in 1 Timothy 6, having food and

clothing, we will with these things be content.

Now, are you content with only food and clothing? If you have only food and clothing, let's say covering, because I understand the word clothing can mean covering. That could include shelter. Let's say you have shelter from the elements.

You have adequate clothing, you have adequate food, but you have nothing else. Are you content? Paul said you should be. And certainly you should be.

All those things are necessary things. Anything beyond that, a person can live without, and therefore we cannot call them needs. We have a new idea in our day of what needs are, because the church has foolishly followed the teaching of secular psychologists like Abraham Maslow, who has concluded that human beings have a hierarchy of needs and that we're a bundle of needs, and when our needs are not met, we become antisocial people, and if we would just get all our needs met, that we would be fine, well-adjusted people, self-actualized people.

And in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, there's not only the need for food and shelter and so forth, but there's also the need for self-love and self-esteem and acceptance from other people, and there's all these emotional needs too. And so we live in a culture, even where the church has accepted the idea that we have emotional needs, but the word need should not be applied there. Let's just say some things are necessary for our emotional happiness, and therefore in the context of happiness, if I must be happy, then I have certain needs that will help me be happy.

But who says we have to be happy? That is just our assumption in our culture. The Bible indicates what our needs are, our food and clothing, that's essentially it. And if we have these things, we're told to be content.

Now, if you lack any necessary thing, and you ask God for it, He says you'll get it. I have not yet seen an instance where God denied a good and necessary thing to any child of His who asked for it. David said the same thing when he said, I have been young, and now I am old, and yet I've never seen the righteous forsaken, neither his seed begging bread.

Now, we often want much more than food and clothing, and sometimes we ask for it, and sometimes we don't get it. But if we don't, we cannot claim that God has defaulted on His promise here. He has not promised to give you every selfish thing you want, but every good thing that you ask for.

Now, of course, good things can be more than just food and clothing. You may be well asking God to give you adequate transportation, or some other necessary thing, or some other important thing. Even if something is not essential for survival, it may yet be a good thing.

And I'm not suggesting that you have no right to pray for more than your daily bread. I believe we should pray for everything that we consider to be essential, everything we consider necessary. Perhaps your work requires a computer, or a car, or a musical instrument.

Who knows? If you are correct in assessing that these are things that God wants you to have because of His call on your life, and your need to put those to proper use for His kingdom's sake, then there's every reason that you should feel comfortable praying for them. And if they are good things, God will certainly give them to you. The point here is, though, that God is not obligated to give us everything we selfishly want.

He is, however, committed to giving us everything that is good for us to have. And no good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly, the Scripture says. And Jesus said it this way, So will your heavenly Father as in heaven give good things to those who ask Him.

Now, I might just compare this with the parallel passage in Luke for the sake of broadening our understanding of what Jesus is talking about. Because in Luke chapter 11, we have the parallel to this. And in Luke 11, 9 through 13, it says, And I say to you, ask and it shall be given you.

Seek and you will find. Knock and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds.

And to him who knocks it will be opened. Notice the similarity here. We've got the same passage, but in Luke.

Then Luke says, or Jesus says in Luke, If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? If he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If you then, being evil, know how to give good things to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him? Now, do you notice the only difference in this passage is that in Matthew 7 and verse 11, it says the Father will give good things to those who ask Him. In the exact same paragraph, when found in Luke, he says the Father will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him. Which suggests that Jesus here is presuming, or assuming, that His disciples will be asking for spiritual benefits, for the assistance of God.

Jesus has been teaching in the Sermon on the Mount a very lofty standard that is not easy to be attained. In fact, it's impossible to attain it in your own flesh. And therefore, when He says, ask and knock and seek, and you'll find and you'll receive it, He may well be thinking in this case of nothing other than the spiritual assistance, the Holy Spirit who is given to us to help us walk according to the way that He has been teaching here.

Therefore, He's not talking about asking for an RV or a speedboat or a pleasure craft or something. He's talking about asking for the spiritual strength, for the infilling of the Holy Spirit, so that you can carry out the things that are good to do, the very things Jesus is teaching in this passage. Now, I don't believe that the only good things that we're entitled to ask for are the Holy Spirit and for spiritual things.

But I do believe that spiritual things are the best things that we should be obsessed with asking for. And we should be asking all the time that God will spiritually enable us to fulfill His will. The last verse in this paragraph, we didn't read it.

It's Matthew 7, 12. Jesus said, Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the law and the prophets. Obviously, we could justly spend a whole session on this one verse.

It's called the Golden Rule. But really, it comes up again and again and again throughout the entire teaching of Jesus. All it is is a restatement of the command, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

But what it shows is that love is not just a feeling. Love is something manifested in doing. If you love your neighbor as you love yourself, then whatever you want people to do to you is what you want done to someone you love, because you love yourself.

And therefore, you should do the same thing to someone else that you would want people to do to you. You, therefore, demonstrate that you love them as much as you love yourself. The main thing we learn about love from that passage is that love is a matter of doing things.

And this is the whole law and the prophets. Elsewhere, Jesus said, If you love your neighbor as yourself, and if you love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, you fulfill all the law and the prophets. And here He says something similar.

He just rephrases it. Instead of using the term love your neighbor as you love yourself, He puts it into practical terms. Do to your neighbor what you want done to yourself, because what you want done to yourself is what you want done to someone you love, because you do love yourself.

The Bible teaches that very clearly. And if you love yourself and you want certain things done to you because you love yourself, then do those same things to the other person. And then you will be loving them as you love yourself.

Now, of course, as I said, this statement, usually called the golden rule, would certainly justify many hours of expansion. But that's just what the Sermon on the Mount is all about. In fact, He begins this verse, Therefore, whatever you want men to do, do also to them.

It seems as if by saying therefore, He is saying this is sort of a summary of all that I've said until now. All that is in the Sermon on the Mount up to this point is about this, that you must treat others in the manner that you would desire them to treat you. And so as we read the Sermon on the Mount, what we are reading is a great amplification of this one principle, love your neighbor as you love yourself.

The Sermon on the Mount is not so many laws to be followed in a legalistic fashion, like the law of the Old Testament was by some of the Jews. The Sermon on the Mount is simply an amplification, an illustration, an application of the one thing needful, which is to love your neighbor as you love yourself. And it shows how it is that you do to your neighbor the thing that you want done to you.

And so Jesus summarizes, as it were, the whole Sermon on the Mount with this statement, Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them likewise, for this is the law and the prophets. And so we run out of time for the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. We'll continue it next time.

I hope you'll be able to join us as we continue this study.