

Matthew 7:7-12
Protectionism or Inquiry?
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11-17-19

As we begin, I want to give you an update on Pastor Jonathan and the Cornell Family. As you can probably imagine, moving into the season of Thanksgiving, Advent, and Christmas, this is a time of year that is filled with emotions. For us this will be, and in fact already has been, a season of firsts. Beginning a few weeks ago with Conner's birthday, then mine, Amy's will be this Tuesday. Thanksgiving, Christmas, trips to Minnesota, New Years, followed by what will hopefully be a very short winter.

I continue to have moments of immense highs and lows, having lost my wife to that horrid disease. They seem to come and go in 3-4 week stretches. The difficulty I see, and this is true for anyone who has lost someone dear to them, we will forever hold the sadness side-by-side in tension with happiness.

I am seeing a counselor, and we have an appointment for the kids to go to a place called Erin's Place which offers grief support for kids who have lost loved ones.

One of the things all of this is teaching me is how incapable I am of managing everything on my own. Not only has this time required logistical help for making sure the kids are well cared for, but it has caused me to seek, ask, pursue the kind of help that transcends our physical lists. The Bible has a word for this, wisdom, the kind that makes the way for deep and abiding shalom and peace knowing that whatever our circumstances God is our constant in all of it.

Throughout this month we have looked at passages from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount that reveal to us a life in pursuit of flourishing. Jesus recognizes the people's longing for more from life, and with these passages points us to the way to receive that, but more importantly points us to himself.

Today we come to an inevitable point in all of our walks of faith, the question of what happens how we approach God in our times of need, whether it's material, emotional, or spiritual. Is there a posture of faith that aligns our hearts with the direction of God's heart working in our lives? How do we ask God for the things we long for? And is there a way that our wills can long for the things God desires?

There's a leadership guru by the name of Patrick Lencioni who says you can tell the health of a person or organization by monitoring how they speak to and about one another. And you can classify language into two categories: language of advocacy and language of inquiry. When challenges present themselves to our groups, do we retreat into our silos of defensiveness? How can we protect ourselves and get what's ours? Or do we have a strong sense of mission and purpose and ask questions about how we can better live out our sense of call? Are we merely advocating for protecting status quo and our immediate needs, or are we inquiring into the direction of the Holy Spirit's lead?

In our political and social climate today you can see that it's all advocacy, and very little inquiry. We are yelling louder and louder, we are retreating into our cadres of like-mindedness, we're tweeting

and Facebooking, and Instagramming up a storm, and as a result we are slipping further and further from health.

In the book of James there's a verse that is often used when a person lacks in some way, I've seen it used when it comes to financial wealth, in physical health, in relational companionship. And I've always struggled with it. It says: You have not because you ask not. Is that why things didn't turn out the way I wanted, because I didn't ask? I did. Or I didn't ask rightly, or with the right incantation, or with a wrong heart or motive? That just sounds cruel.

But I'm not sure that is what that verse is all about. James says that our passions are at war within us, and the things we desire we do not have not because we have not asked for them, but it's because we do not approach life from a place of demanding, rather than curiosity. We do not have, because we are unwilling to ask questions and then listen for God's voice in return.

In our text today Jesus introduces to us the posture of searching and finding, and it's a posture of inquiry. Verse 7 begins, for those of us who lack—and that's all of us—"ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be open to you." Now there may be one or two of you who have heard a sermon or talk about these verses before, and you probably heard the speaker use this convenient little acronym A-S-K, (ASK, SEEK, KNOCK). And what's interesting about the grammatical tense of the Greek words is that they all occur in the present imperative tense. Jesus is saying we are to persist and keep on persisting, don't give up, don't ever give up. And if we keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking, God will eventually hear us.

Is that all it takes? Just persistence, as if we just need to make sure we get God's attention. Because the truth of the matter is, I didn't stop praying and persisting for the answer I was asking, seeking, and knocking down the door for my wife, and it didn't happen. I bet every one of you knows what that's like too. Is that what God is like?

Or is it a matter of just aligning with what God really wants, and what God really wants is for God's glory to be honored, and that our longings and prayers become meaningful to God only when they conform with his Glory. Does it really make a difference? Does God change the course of history because we pray, or don't pray? Does persistence pay off?

Is there a way that our prayers can shift from advocacy (God, I need, I need, I need) to inquiry (God help me to know what you are doing in all this, which feels so confusing, and help me to know how to ask for the right things)?

For God's people, the prayer book has always been the Psalms. For the Israelites, from an early age they spent time saturated by the Psalms, memorizing and reciting passages of prayer, giving them a vocabulary for their life's conversation with God. And there are all sorts of prayer in the psalms, words that express our longing for God to act in a mighty way in our lives and in our circumstances—we all this petitionary prayer. Psalm 55 says "Give ear to my prayer, O God, and hide not yourself from my plea for mercy!"

Psalm 2 – Why do the nations rage and people plot in vain?

Psalm 8 – What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?

Psalm 24 – Who is the king of glory?

Psalm 35 – How long, O Lord, will you look on? Rescue me from destruction, my life from the lions

The prayer life of those who have walked closest with God is one that sounds less like a grocery list, and more like questions of a child who is seeking to understand the where's and the why's of faith. In those Psalms what we hear is the author not barking out his list of demands of the things he needs from God. But inquiring into the goodness and gentleness and kindness of God to know and understand. Prayer is our request for God to be the God revealed to us through his Word, and for the wisdom to align our hearts and our trust with that.

Inquiry, a life of seeking, questioning, longing to understand. Advocacy, just a list of demands. We even see it play out in examples throughout Scripture where the people of God came to him with their requests and prayers. Look at the difference of posture:

1. 1 Samuel 8 the Israelites demand for themselves a king so that they would be like all the other nations around them. They were not content with allowing God to reign in their lives and wanted to be like all the others, rather than live into their identity as God's chosen and set apart people. We don't want to be unique, we want status quo. So God gave them what they wanted, and what followed was a long history of a lot of pain and heartache.
2. Matthew 20 Mother of sons of Zebedee came to Jesus and asked him to let her two boys sit at Jesus right and left hand in his kingdom. And Jesus is like: "lady, you haven't the slightest clue of what you are asking."

Advocacy, comes from a place of worry and distrust that God does not or will not be faithful to God's character.

Inquiry is when we ask God to bring our minds, our wills, our curiosity in line with God's. Inquiry seeks after wisdom to see the bigger picture of God's sovereignty and trust that God will be who God will be, merciful, just, compassionate.

1. In Luke 11, the disciples come to Jesus and ask him: "Jesus teach us how to pray." Teach us how to communicate with the Father and the vocabulary we need to be in conversation and come to know the mind and will of the Father.
2. In 1 Kings 3 it says that the newly crowned King Solomon walked closely with God and when he went to a place called Gibeon to make an offering to the Lord, God appeared to Solomon in a dream and said: "Ask for what I shall give you?" And Solomon replied: "Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I might discern between good and evil." Give me curiosity and a mind towards inquiry. And God is so taken by this request that he gives Solomon extravagantly more, because he knew that he could handle it.

In Matthew 6:33 Jesus says to his disciples: Seek first the Kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all of these things will be added unto you.

So when Jesus says ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be open I think what he is inviting us to is a life of prayer that is curious, that seeks after wisdom and understanding of God, rather than just a life where our relationship with God is a grocery list. A life

with God is not just asking God for things, but a life in which we ask of God all things. Curiosity is a sure fire way to deeper and deeper intimacy, and deeper and deeper wisdom.

When Jesus says ask, seek, knock these aren't just the three different approaches to getting what you want from God, but an invitation to stand before God.

In the book of Genesis there is a scene in chapter 18 where God is about to destroy the city of Sodom and Abraham stands before God. And in that moment, Abraham asks: if there are fifty, if there are thirty, if there are ten will you still destroy it. And God finally says, for the sake of the 10 I will not destroy it. Look at what Abraham does, Abraham asks questions, Abraham is curious and continues to ask questions of God. Verse 22 says that the men turned from there and went toward Sodom, but Abraham stood still before the Lord.

What about this God? And what about this? And what about this? The Judeo-Christian is the only one that gives you and me the freedom not just to surrender before God, but also the incredible privilege of standing before God in prayer and ask, seek, and knock. What about this God? And what about this? This is what we are invited to do.

And in just a moment, this is what we are going to invite you to do with these cards that we've given you. Each year we ask of you to help us in making responsible financial decisions, by offering your tithe and pledge. Again, a tithe is what the Scriptures call for, the first fruits of 10 %. But again, this is a chance for us to inquire of God: what can be done with my gifts? What could be possible with our joining together in deeper faithfulness? What about a deeper and more robust middle school ministry? What about scholarships for our Montessori Preschool? What about a partnership with the Wabash County Courts to reach out to men and women coming out of incarceration to be a part of their healing and rehabilitation? What about being equipped emotionally and spiritually to go as small groups from this church into our neighborhoods and communities and embody the hope of Jesus Christ and a life transformed by him? What about shoring up our facility through generous and sacrificial giving so that this place can be a place of mission and service for another 175 years?

What about it?

For the next few minutes I want to invite us to simply take this time to spend with our commitment cards, both what's on the front of it, our financial commitment, but also what's on the back of it as well. I want to invite you all to consider where you can give yourself to deeper commitment. Maybe its setting aside a few more minutes for prayer or reading. Maybe it's inviting a neighbor over for coffee to learn about their lives. Jesus is inviting all of us to a deepening more curious faith.

What about it Jesus?