

**Matthew 7:7-12 (1984 NIV)**  
***Ask, Seek, Knock***

**Introduction**

There was once an experiment done. A chicken was placed in a cage. On one end were two buttons—one red and the other green.

When the chicken pecked on the green button, a grain would be released. When the red button was pecked, nothing came out. The chicken soon learned that pecking on the green button would release food.

But when the effect of each button was reversed, the chicken realized that pecking the green button did nothing. The result is that it stopped pecking altogether.

I hope we do not liken praying to pressing a magic button to get God to release what we want. And I hope we will not stop praying altogether when the wanted result is not forthcoming.

Matthew 7:7-8 reads: “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.”

When Christians read Matthew 7:7-8ff and detach it from its context, they often come to this mistaken conclusion—i.e. if we pray for something, and pray for it often and sincerely enough, this thing will eventually be given us—no matter what it is, and what our motives are.

Hence, we need to understand vv. 7-8ff in its context. To do so, we need to go back to Matthew 5.

**I. Matthew 7:7-8ff must be understood in the context of what Jesus has been teaching, beginning from Chapter 5.**

Jesus has been teaching:

- Rejoice when persecuted.
- Be salt and light.
- Turn the other cheek.
- Love your enemies.
- Devote totally to God.
- Don't worry about tomorrow.
- Don't judge others.

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I wonder how many of us find these instructions easy to obey. If we are honest, I believe we often find these difficult to obey and to keep on obeying. Indeed, we may love the Lord, but as we try to obey and keep up with these instructions of the Lord, we realize how far we fall short and how much we struggle.

Hence, there is the need to pray for strength and wisdom to live out these instructions, and to pray in a persevering manner. It is in light of how far we fall short of the Lord's instructions that we are to ask and keep asking, to seek and keep seeking, and to knock and keep knocking.

Thus, vv. 7-8ff does not teach us that God will give us anything and everything, regardless of our motives, as long as we pray often and sincerely enough for that thing.

Understood in its proper context, vv. 7-8ff challenges us to pray and pray perseveringly, in view of our own inadequacies, for strength and wisdom to live out Kingdom lifestyle in order to glorify God:

- If we find it difficult to rejoice when persecuted for Jesus' sake, we are to pray perseveringly for strength and wisdom to do so.
- If we find it difficult to be salt and light in the world, we are to pray perseveringly for strength and wisdom to do so.
- If we find it difficult to turn the other cheek, we are to pray perseveringly for strength and wisdom to do so.
- If we find it difficult to love our enemies, we are to pray perseveringly for strength and wisdom to do so.
- If we find it difficult to devote totally to God, we are to pray perseveringly for strength and wisdom to do so.
- If we find it difficult to stop worrying about tomorrow, we are to pray perseveringly for strength and wisdom to do so.
- If we find it difficult to stop judging others with a critical spirit, we are to pray perseveringly for strength and wisdom to do so.

What does this imply? It implies that all our perseverance in prayer is not an act of demanding from God. Instead, all our perseverance in prayer is an act of thirsting for God's holiness to be seen in and through our lives.

For example, what do we pray for in view of a coming evangelistic event in church? Well, we pray for the preacher, the person giving testimony, the worship team, the counsellors, and the people we intend to invite. And we pray perseveringly for all these way ahead of the event.

We pray with an expectation that God will answer our prayers in good measure. This kind of praying has its validity. But the problem with it is that it begins from our circumstances and then to God. It is telling God in a

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persistent manner, “Lord, this is our situation. Now, do something about it ... and you must!”

But if our perseverance in prayer is an act of thirsting for God’s holiness to be seen in and through our lives, we pray not by beginning from our circumstances and then to God. Rather, we pray by beginning from God and then to our circumstances. We say, “Lord, you are holy. Now, help us to set things right in our situation so that we can be holy as you are holy.”

And when we begin from the perspective that God is holy and we are sinful, we know that we sinful mortals cannot demand anything from a holy God. So we ask God to first act in us (as a person and as a church) for we seek first to be holy as He is holy.

And this may require of us to pray for God ...

- To strengthen our desire to minister with our spiritual gift(s) with passion.
- To help us live with more Christ-likeness before unbelievers.
- To help or change us to love that person who may seem so unlovable.

This is the thirst for God’s holiness that Matthew 7:7-8ff is exhorting us to do as we persevere in prayer—to ask God to reveal the unrighteousness in us, and help us deal with and overcome it. It is a perseverance by which we do not demand God to release His goodies to us, but by which we demand ourselves to resolve to set our lives right before God.

When I was still a lecturer with Singapore Bible College, I was overseeing field education together with another colleague. Students were required to chalk up a certain number of field education credits before they could graduate.

Besides having to undertake actual field attachment in church, every student was required to submit a monthly report, highlighting some aspects of his field ministry for each month.

And there was this student who was really impressive—at least on paper. He was so neat, detailed and meticulous with his reporting that his reports were often pinned up on the board as a sample of what we expect from students.

Almost a year after he had graduated, he phoned me one day, asking to see my colleague and me. When we met, he looked at both of us for a while and said, “I have something to confess to both of you. You remember those beautiful reports I submitted? I cheated on them.”

I asked him, “What do you mean?”

He explained, “Well, many times I did not do those things that I had put down on paper. Many times I wrote them down but was just too busy to do them. But as best as I could, I did try to work on them in subsequent months.”

He paused, and with tears in his eyes, added, “I lied to both of you.”

And taking out his degree from his bag, he continued, “This is the degree awarded to me by the college. I am now surrendering it. Please revoke the award for I don’t feel worthy as a cheat to possess it.”

I asked him what made him come to us.

He said, “Well, I have been working hard to teach my church people because the charismatic issues are really confusing them. I attended this pastors’ retreat, and we were asked to pray. And as I was doing this one morning, praying for my confused people, I felt a strong sense of God’s presence. I sensed a strong rebuke from the Lord.”

I asked, “How did you sense His rebuke?”

He said, “I was working hard to teach my people the Word, but I sensed the Lord rebuking me for being a phony teacher. He brought to my mind the many times I had cheated on my field education reports. And the Spirit of God just convicted me that I would need to come to you and set things right.”

Did we revoke the award of his degree? No, we didn’t. He sought the Lord’s forgiveness, received it, and came to us. We thanked him for his courage to come to us and reassured him of the Lord’s forgiveness. We prayed with him for the Lord’s continuing use of him in His church.

This person sensed God’s holiness. He saw his own unworthiness. This led him to pray for his own life though he was intending to pray for the confused people in his church.

We may say, “A few misrepresented reports that will not cause any harm at all—no big deal!” But when God convicts, it is a big deal because the sense of His holiness is really awesome.

And to pray with perseverance in the context of Matthew 7:7-8ff is to thirst for God’s holiness to be seen in and through our own lives.

Hence, Jesus’ exhortation to “ask, seek, knock” is not to arm-twist God so as to get our way. Rather, it springs from an awareness of our own spiritual

poverty before God. To “ask, seek, knock” is to persevere in praying to God. Such perseverance pleases God because ...

## **II. By so persevering, we constantly commit ourselves into the hands of God (vv.7-8).**

To “ask, seek, knock” before God as His child is to depend on Him because we acknowledge that His ways are always right and His resources are always sufficient.

Though v. 8 says that “everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened”, this promise is not a blank cheque for everybody.

This promise is not only restricted to believers, but to believers who commit themselves to living in obedience to God, and to submitting to His will. In other words, we have to first examine our own obedience and submission before we can claim the certainty of the promise in v. 8 for ourselves.

Obedience and submission means that we should be doing whatever we already know of God’s will as we persevere in prayer before Him. It is not faith but presumption when we claim to be asking God to guide and provide when we are not already faithfully obeying and submitting to what He has already given or made known to us.

Put in another way, the promise of receiving what we ask, finding what we seek, and opening of the door we knock on presupposes that we have already committed ourselves into the hands of God in matters of obedience and submission.

But we often mistake this promise of receiving, finding and opening as a means to consume from the hands of God, not to commit into His hands. Why? It is because of our culture of consumerism. We view God as someone who is there to hand out goodies and we just take them from His hands.

But this promise in v. 8 does not encourage us to be consumers and takers. Rather, it challenges us to be committed in the way we obey and submit to the Lord, and to be givers. We are to commit ourselves into God’s hands and live, not as takers from God, but as givers to our fellow men.

When we understand this promise of giving to others in this light, then the “golden rule” in v. 12 will make much sense to us—“So in everything, do to others what you have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.”

Many Christians believe that their faith is a good thing. In fact, some may even view the Christian faith as a mark of the good life since many Christians

seem so well to do educationally and economically. And in a consumerist culture, the danger of looking at the Christian faith as a good thing or good life is that we are tempted to experience Christianity like a tourist. We want to enjoy and experience the best of a certain place in the shortest possible time, and then quickly move on; we want to consume the best comfort it has to offer with no commitment to stay put and share its struggles.

Up until the last part of the twentieth century, there were few if any known Christians in Mongolia.

In 1980 a young Mongolian named Yi went to study at a university in Moscow. Yi received an English-language Bible from a fellow student from Tanzania. "You can study English with it," the Tanzanian student explained. Yi then studied the Word for seven years, returning to Mongolia and rising to become a top English interpreter with the government.

In 1987 Yi was assigned to an American big-game tourist group, which had come to Mongolia to hunt bears. Doug Coe, a Christian, was one of the tourists. During the hunting trip Yi found the opportunity to secretly ask Doug, "Do you know God?" Doug nodded. Three hours later, Yi was able to whisper, "What is his name?"

"Jesus Christ."

In bits and pieces of stolen conversations throughout the rest of the big-game hunt, Doug was able to introduce Yi to Jesus.

"Don't worry," he told Yi, "I know it's illegal to be a Christian here, and it will be hard for you. But friends will come."

Then the foreign hunters left Mongolia. Three years later Yi was assigned to another foreign tour group—a Christian Native American cowboy team. So Yi translated their testimonies on national TV and interpreted their explanation of the Gospel to press groups and officials. Several Mongolians responded to the team's challenge to receive Christ, and Yi spent hours and hours talking to the team about the Word. Then they too had to leave Mongolia.

Yi began discipling those who'd come to Christ through the cowboys' ministry. Then another tour group came, a few members of which happened to be pastors. The ministers, after days of intense discipling, realized the depth of Yi's Bible knowledge and the unusual bursts of his spiritual insights. So they all gathered in a hotel room in Ulaan Bataar (capital of Mongolia) one very cold day in November 1990 and ordained Yi as an elder of the first Mongolian church in the history of the world!

How was it all possible? The work of one man who committed himself to obey and submit to God's leading had made this possible—Doug Coe. He visited Mongolia as a tourist. But he did not live his Christian faith like a tourist. When the Lord opened the door of opportunity, he responded and shared the gospel with that Mongolian whom God had led into his path. And that Mongolian was one whom God had ordained in His plan to be a key leader in the first ever church on Mongolian soil.

([http://www.sermonillustrator.org/illustrator/sermon12/adding\\_to\\_their\\_number.htm](http://www.sermonillustrator.org/illustrator/sermon12/adding_to_their_number.htm))

Many Christians do admit that this world is not their home, and their earthly experience is just temporary. But the unfortunate thing is that many tend to live their temporary existence here on earth like a tourist. They prefer the good and comfort that their faith brings to them. They prefer the delight of exciting spiritual experiences, but shun the demands of exacting spiritual disciplines.

Indeed, many prefer to experience Christianity like a tourist rather than like a pilgrim. You see, a pilgrim lives his life as if he is going to some place by way of a long journey. Like a tourist in a foreign land, he knows he is not home in this world. But unlike a tourist, the pilgrim does not expect his temporal stay here on earth to be always nice and easy. He takes on both comfort and difficulties in his strides. The pilgrim learns to press on regardless of his circumstances.

The pilgrim does not see himself as merely taking and consuming from the hands of God. Rather, he sees himself as giving and committing himself into the God's hands. He does not grasp tightly the things of this world in his fist. Rather, he holds them lightly in his palm, always obedient and submissive to God, and ready to release these things to bless others and glorify God.

The Christian perseverance in prayer is an expression of this pilgrim's mindset—i.e. in so doing, we learn to constantly commit ourselves into the hands of God.

To “ask, seek, knock” is to persevere in praying to God. Another reason why such perseverance pleases God is because ...

### **III. By so persevering, we constantly challenge ourselves to seek to be first responsible (vv. 9-12).**

Earthly imperfect fathers know how to give good gifts to their children. No father will give his son a stone when he asks for bread. Likewise, the earthly father will not give his son a (poisonous) snake when he asks for a fish.

If that is true of earthly imperfect, how much more it will be true of our heavenly perfect Father. God will answer when we ask, and He will answer in a way He sees 'good'. He knows what is best for us, and He answers us according to His own infinite wisdom and knowledge of what is best for us.

There will be times when we do not get what we ask because God in His divine wisdom knows that it is not the best for us. In other words, we need God more than gifts, yet the greatest gift from prayer is God Himself—i.e. to know that whatever God's answer may be, we will experience God behind it, and see the very heart of God.

And the heart of God is for us to live and act in righteousness and godliness—love your enemies and all other radical commitments to Christian living.

Indeed, the “golden rule” in v. 12—“Do to others what you would have them do to you” reveals the very heart of God—i.e. for His people to live with a supernatural kind of relational ethics that initiates good towards others, not to wait to receive good from others. We are to persevere in asking God to help us live out this “golden rule”—i.e. to seek to be first responsible.

The one important thing to note in the “golden rule” is that we are to take responsibility to initiate:

- If I want the other person to be kind to me, I will be kind to him first
- If I want the other person to be honest with me, I will be honest with him first
- If I want people to help me when I am hurting, I will first help them when they are hurting
- If I want someone to listen to me, I will listen to him first
- If I want someone to respect me, I will respect him first
- If I want someone to be reconciled with me, I will have to recognize my own contribution to the conflict and first seek forgiveness from that person.

But we must not allow the “golden rule” to degenerate into a means of manipulating others to our advantage—i.e. I want to be nice to others with the ulterior motive of wanting them to be nice to me.

Living the “golden rule” is to live out a life of righteousness and godliness as we relate with others. Thus, the “golden rule” cannot be lived for selfish or unrighteousness motives. It is lived for the glory of God. It is not a self-centred goal—i.e. to obligate others to be nice to us. Rather, it is a guide to righteous and godly living.

I remember when I was pastoring a church, I had hard time trying to pull the council to my side concerning a certain decision at one meeting, I came home very angry with myself and disappointed with the council.



My wife greeted me when I reached home and noticed my forlorn look. She then asked, "What's wrong?"

I told her briefly of my frustration, and said, "I think I really did a lousy job at the meeting. What do you think?"

She answered, "Well, as far as I am concerned, you still score a 10!"

And then she asked me a theological question, "You remember that part of Scripture that says that there will be no marriage in heaven. Does that mean that we will not be husband and wife anymore in heaven?"

I answered, "Well I believe in heaven, we will still be close to each other, but we will relate to each other in a different manner."

And she replied with a strong protest in her voice, "I don't care. Even in heaven, I still want you as my husband!"

You know, I had never felt so wanted in my life. And I received that much-needed boost to keep going. I reckoned that if my earthly wife could so encourage me to keep on, how much more my heavenly Father would want me to press on.

Indeed, God still hold us dear to Himself no matter how badly we think we have failed or have been hurt. This implies that even if we are being taken advantage of, we will not abandon the "golden rule". Rather, we perseveringly ask God to help us continue because it guides us to live in a way that fulfils the Law and the Prophets—i.e. the very will of God in our lives.

Often times, we could not experience this supernatural kind of relational ethics because we have been hurt. We see this as a personal failure. And in our success-oriented culture, there is very little room for failures.

So, we dare not venture. We do the safe thing—i.e. don't do anything so that we can avoid being hurt or failing again. Or we may do the cruel thing—we hurt others just we have been hurt; we fail others just as we have been betrayed. And we end up as, at best, mediocre in our life witness for the Lord.

But we must dare to venture if we are to excel in our life witness for the Lord. To excel is to risk being hurt and failing. And God allows us to be hurt and to fail in order that we can be refined as better instruments in His hands.

We are exhorted to "ask, seek, knock" for we need constantly to call on God to help us live out the "golden rule"—i.e. to constantly challenge ourselves to be first responsible rather than to first receive. And the blessed assurance is

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that God will hear and so we will “find” and “receive” as He “opens” the way for us.

## **Conclusion**

Living as the people of God, we are to be light to the world so that others will see God’s transforming power in us. We stand out in order to draw people to the truth and the wonder of who God is. The Lord Jesus calls us to radically trust God with all that we are and all that we have. And God will supply!

Jesus’ exhortation to “ask, seek, knock” is not to arm-twist God so as to get our way. Rather, it springs from an awareness of one’s own spiritual poverty before God. To “ask, seek, knock” is to persevere in praying to God.

*Let’s “ask, seek, knock” at the throne of God’s grace in faith and hope so that we can live truly as citizens of His Kingdom, and not merely as consumers of His gifts.*

Amen!