

#### D. The Way into the Kingdom: Summary Introduction (7:7-12)

Verses 7-12 of the seventh chapter provide the bridge between Jesus' treatment of the kingdom's ethic and His presentation of the way men must enter it.

- It provides an epilogue to the ethical section of the discourse in that it highlights the truth that the essence of the kingdom's ethic is the life of love – the life of authentic sonship that gives tangible expression to God's renewing and transforming grace.
- But, for the same reason, this passage also provides the transition into the next section. For, rightly understood, it points to the crucial truth that one enters the kingdom, not on the basis of genetic descent, covenant heritage, or religious or ethical integrity, but the new birth; men enter the kingdom of heaven only by being made true sons in the Son (cf. John 1:12-13, 3:1-6, also 8:31-43).

At first glance, the contention that this passage highlights sonship as the heart of "kingdom life" may not appear obvious, but it becomes evident under closer scrutiny. Certain contextual clues point in this direction, but the greatest indication is the passage's emphasis on the unilateral nature of man's righteous relationship with God: Human beings ask, seek and knock, and God answers and supplies. One-sidedness – a Father giving and a child receiving – characterizes the healthy parent/dependent child relationship, and Jesus (consistent with the whole of Scripture) assigned just such a relationship to the heavenly Father and the sons of His kingdom (7:11). This dynamic of divine provision and human reception in dependence, humility, trust and gratitude is fundamental to understanding the biblical maxims that *the righteous live by faith* and *everything that is not of faith is sin* (Romans 1:16-17, 14:23).

1. Immediately after exhorting the multitude to right judgment, Jesus encouraged them that God is their resource in all things. He did so by means of three parallel exhortations, each having a corresponding promise of divine provision (7:7-8). A few observations about this are noteworthy:
  - a. First, all three exhortations share the same grammatical construction that may be rendered: *Continue asking; continue seeking; continue knocking*. Interestingly, people's first impression of these words is that they suggest God's slowness or even reluctance to respond to human petitions. If someone is to prevail with God, he must keep after Him. This is the immediate impression because it is the natural one. The "natural" mind is self-referential and self-sufficient; from its vantage point, the reason for continual petition to God must be some deficiency in Him.

But the context indicates otherwise. Jesus was emphatic that divine dullness, unconcern or reluctance aren't the reason for continual asking and seeking; God is more receptive and beneficent in His giving than the most loving earthly father. The need for constant petition derives, not from deficiency in God, but in *men*. Human beings must keep asking, seeking, and knocking for two reasons: First, because their own neediness never ends; second, because they have no capacity to meet their own need. They must seek their provision from God.

- b. Second, the three exhortations and corresponding assurances act synergistically to highlight and reinforce *one* truth. Each verbal idea builds upon and intensifies its predecessor: Seeking shows greater fervency than asking, and knocking shows greater fervency still. “*We ask for what we need; we seek what we earnestly desire; we knock when our desire becomes importunity*” (Lenski). And yet all express the same fundamental idea and together speak to the same core truth: A living knowledge of the true God expresses itself in unwearied and unflappable confidence in Him. To truly know God is to trust and rely upon Him. Even as love is at the heart of the kingdom’s ethic, so is *faith*.
- c. The third thing to consider is how Jesus was viewing those to whom He was directing His instruction. Christians who read this passage usually (if only unconsciously) start from the premise that Jesus’ words have direct application to them. It is as if He were speaking directly to them, and the implication is that He was instructing *Christians* that they are to “ask, seek, and knock.”

But Jesus was addressing a *Jewish* multitude that still lived, perceived and reasoned from the vantage point of the time of preparation under the Old Covenant. They weren’t in any sense “Christian,” and it’s a first order mistake to view Jesus’ words through that lens. Jesus was well aware of His audience’s perspective and mindset and sought to communicate with them at the point of their own understanding and place in salvation history; He formed and framed His teaching with the goal of confronting their misconception of the messianic kingdom and leading them to see it for what it is and embrace it in truth.

This means that Jesus’ repeated reference to “*your Father who is in heaven*” (7:11, cf. 5:48, 6:14, 26, 32) cannot be interpreted as proving that the multitudes were bona-fide sons of His kingdom (or that He regarded them as such). Jesus was confronting them with His kingdom, not affirming their place in it – a truth evident in His proclamation that these “sons” of the Father could find themselves not forgiven by Him (6:15). Indeed, the whole sermon is oriented toward the fearful truth that these “sons of God” could ultimately find themselves outside of His kingdom (7:13-14, 21-27). *Jesus referred to His Jewish hearers as children of their heavenly Father, while simultaneously exhorting and warning them that many who will say, “Lord, Lord” will find themselves not entering His kingdom.*

Taking these considerations into account, it seems clear that Jesus was using the language of sonship to indicate the Jews’ covenantal heritage and privilege. As the national covenant children of Abraham, the people of Israel were “sons of God” (Exodus 4:22-23) and sons of the kingdom promised to him – first, as citizens of the Israelite theocracy, but also as the rightful heirs of the messianic kingdom (Romans 9:1-5). The sons of Israel had first rights to the kingdom of heaven; they were Abraham’s natural branches, but their unbelief would find the kingdom being taken from them and given to authentic, spiritual sons who would bear its fruit (8:5-12, 21:23-44; cf. Luke 13:20-30; Romans 9:6-11:24).

Thus, when Jesus referred to God as the “heavenly Father” of His hearers, He was speaking in the language of their own understanding and self-perception. Yahweh was their covenant Father by birthright, heritage, and prophetic witness, but He would only become their Father *in truth* as they entered His kingdom through the narrow gate of faith in His Son.

- d. How, then, is Jesus’ exhortation to ask, seek, and knock to be understood? The fact that He framed it as an ongoing pursuit indicates that He meant more than that His hearers were to seek to enter His kingdom, though this was clearly a part of what He had in mind. Given His audience and the thrust of His instruction, perhaps the best way to summarize Jesus’ meaning is as follows:
  - 1) “Asking, seeking, and knocking” points first of all to the Jews’ righteous obligation to enter His kingdom. Both the immediate and overall context make this clear (ref. again 7:13-23). But this meaning reaches beyond the Galilean multitude to embrace all men; having sent His Son, God now commands all people to embrace Him in repentant faith (cf. Acts 14:8-17, 17:22-31). In this regard, Matthew’s use of the present imperative (“keep asking,” etc.) should be understood as highlighting a characteristic pattern or priority of life rather than simply a repeated action.
  - 2) But having gained entrance into Christ’s kingdom through faith in Him, this pattern and priority are to continue for the sons of the kingdom. For them, God has become their “heavenly Father” in truth, which only heightens the gravity and significance of His fatherly goodness and faithfulness. If the legacy of God’s fatherly disposition toward Israel both obligated and encouraged Jesus’ Jewish hearers to ceaselessly seek His favor and provision, how much more should that be the case for those who have become bona-fide sons?
2. Jesus affixed assurances to each of His exhortations: Ask and *it will be given to you*; seek and *you shall find*; knock and *it shall be opened to you*. Two of the three are constructed in the passive voice (the third carries the same connotation) without any direct indication of who it is that gives, discloses and opens. The answer is implied, but Jesus makes it explicit with His illustration (7:9-11). The heavenly Father is the One who meets the need of the asker, seeker, and knocker; more importantly, He provides with a fatherly concern and understanding that infinitely transcend those of His earthly counterparts.

Again, while verse 7 tends to give the impression that perseverance in soliciting God is necessary to gain His ear and provoke His provision, Jesus’ illustration puts the matter in an entirely different light. Everyone recognizes the general fact that human fathers are attuned and receptive to their children’s needs and are eager to meet those needs in spite of their own pervasive and controlling selfishness and self-concern (their “being evil”). How much more attuned and eager is the Father who is free of human corruption? How much more able to provide “good things” is the Father who not only is perfect in goodness, wisdom, and love, but also infinite in capability and resource?

- a. Jesus would have His hearers understand that their solicitations do not fall on deaf, callous or impotent ears. But this being the case, the point of concern in “asking, seeking and knocking” is diverted from God to men. That is, the onus in the petitionary process as well as any deficiency or failure in receiving are placed squarely on human shoulders. *The problem isn't divine deafness or reluctance; the problem is human unbelief, distrust, and self-reliance.* Even the smallest amount of authentic faith is sufficient for a person's full supply (ref. Matthew 17:14-20; Luke 17:1-6; cf. also Matthew 14:23-31, 16:1-12; John 15:1-8).
- b. Men lack what they need because they do not ask God, and they don't ask either because they don't believe God exists or that He can or will provide, or because they feel adequate to supply their own need. They have not because they ask not. *At the same time, there isn't a mechanistic cause-effect relationship between asking and receiving.* Jesus' formula (7:7) was meant to emphasize God's willingness and capability on the one hand and the need for men's faith on the other; it doesn't vindicate the natural human inclination toward religion as magic.

For multitudes, Jesus' words are taken as a blank check; whatever a person asks for or seeks from God he can fully expect to receive so long as he doesn't doubt. Such “faith” is actually sinful presumption; far from being submissive, patient trust in the willingness, goodness and wisdom of a heavenly Father, it is the hubris that believes that a human being can move God's heart and hand by the sheer force of His resoluteness. But James insisted that, just as people can lack because they don't ask God, so God can withhold because they ask with self-serving (and self-righteous) motives (James 4:2-3). In and of themselves, asking, seeking and knocking are of no value or effect; what Jesus was referring to are the exercises of sincere, dependent faith.

3. Jesus concluded this passage with a statement commonly known as the “Golden Rule” (7:12). Though most Christians (and many non-Christians) are familiar with it, few consider or interpret it within the larger context. At first glance, it does appear to stand on its own without any clear connection with the preceding passage, but Jesus' use of the inferential conjunction (“therefore”) to introduce it shows that it somehow provides a summary or important implication of the previous content. The following considerations are helpful in understanding Jesus' intent in this statement:
  - a. First, while it clearly refers back to vv. 7-11, the fact that Jesus regarded the Golden Rule as the sum and substance of the Law and Prophets shows that He was linking it with His overall instruction in the discourse. For Jesus introduced His sermon with the insistence that the Jewish multitude were to regard His teaching – as well as His person and work – as fulfillment of the Law and Prophets, not their abolition (5:17-18). The things He taught and insisted upon didn't deviate from Moses and the Prophets; to the contrary, they were exactly what the Scriptures had spoken of and promised (Luke 24:27, 44; John 5:45-47). Now He was indicating that, in some sense, He was drawing together all His previous instruction in this one principle as the very essence of the Scripture.

- b. The second matter is recognizing how Jesus' exhortation in the Golden Rule "*is the Law and Prophets.*" Different interpretations exist, but it seems evident that Jesus meant that the principle of treating people the way we want to be treated is the heart of what the Scriptures hold forth and require of men. This interpretation is best supported by the fact that the principle embodied in the Golden Rule is a succinct and concrete working definition of *love*, and love is man's all-encompassing obligation in relation to God and other men (Matthew 22:35-40; cf. Romans 13:8-10; James 2:8). The Old Testament scriptures reveal man's created nature and function, the nature and outcome of his fall, and what it means for the human race to be restored to God and perfected according to His eternal intention and design. God used the history of the nation of Israel as the primary vehicle for this revelation, and in that respect He showed repeatedly that Israel's great sin was its violation of the law of love (cf. Deuteronomy 6:4-5, 11:1-16; Ezekiel 16, 23). Yahweh's "beloved" was variously an incorrigible harlot and an unfaithful son; therefore, recovery from the curse would mean God's image-son being able at last to fulfill his obligation of love (cf. Deuteronomy 30:1-6; Hosea 2:1-23).
- c. A third important observation is the fact that Jesus presented this principle in its positive form. That is, He declared what men are to do, not what they're not to do. This is in contrast to the way men naturally tend to view their responsibilities toward others. The Jewish rabbi Hillel is indicative: "*What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow creatures. That is the whole law. All else is explanation.*" The distinction appears subtle, but it is profoundly significant. The reason men tend toward the negative form of the Golden Rule is that it reflects their earthly-mindedness. The earthly mind is the natural, self-referential and self-concerned mind, and the person possessing this mind always takes a *minimalist* approach in his dealings with others (including God). Because they themselves are their first and greatest concern, men don't naturally think in terms of what they **can** do for others, but what they **ought** (or have) to do; when it comes to the treatment of other people, the earthly man's ethic is not *do all possible good*, but *do no harm*.

Significantly, this negative structure is reflected in the interpersonal commandments of the Decalogue ("*You shall not...*"), and is one way in which the Law served as a *prophetic pedagogue* until Christ's coming. For, by constructing the commandments in this way, God was implicitly attesting the fact that Israel's obedience (Israel being a subset of fallen mankind) could only take the form of restraint from doing evil. The positive doing of unqualified good is the work of love, and man in his estrangement is incapable of love. Thus the Law presupposed and highlighted human fallenness while also holding forth love ("*You shall love...*") as its true and ultimate concern (ref. Galatians 3:19-4:6).

Verse 7:12 is best regarded as summarizing all of Jesus' teaching introduced in 5:17-20. But it also directly reflects 7:7-11. For in that passage Jesus enjoined His hearers to confident, dependent faith in a loving heavenly Father. This Father doesn't merely refrain from doing harm; He eagerly gives Himself to the doing of all good, and so it is to be with those who, in their renewal, bear His likeness as true sons of His kingdom.