

“Prayers in the Kingdom”
(or “No Blank Checks”)
Matthew 7:7-11; Habakkuk 3:17-18; II Corinthians 12:7b-9a
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I. Text: **Read Matthew 7:7-11.**

II. Introduction

“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you,”I can’t help but hear guitars playing the old Christian folk song “Seek Ye First” when I read those verses. I was a teenager and college student in the 70’s when contemporary Christian music was really starting to develop. It was alternative Christian music for a younger generation.....music without hymnals and without an organ...music outside the sanctuary and outside worship. And so we sang with guitars in youth rooms.....and sang with guitars at coffee houses.....and sang with guitars around camp fires. And, yes, I will confess.....we often sang the never ending verses of “Kum Ba Yah.” We sang, and “Seek Ye First” was often part of that Christian singing. “Seek Ye First.....Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you”.....we sang, and knew the words.....but really didn’t wonder what the song was all about. We sang, but never really understood that this was an invitation from Jesus to pray.

III. Brief Exegesis

“Ask, seek, knock”first let’s understand what Jesus is “not” saying. Jesus is “not” saying that our “asking, seeking, and knocking” in prayer should be directed by selfishness. God is not some type of vending machine to address our wants. Prayer is not a blank check given to us by God. These verses do not promise that we can get anything we want as long as we pray with persistency and tenacity. So as to not fall to temptation after preaching last Sunday’s sermon, “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged,” let me just say television evangelists and radio preachers who promise that God has great material blessings for each of us, if we just follow their prayer guidance, do not fully understand these verses.

So what “is” Jesus saying about prayer in these well known verses? What was I singing about over 30 years ago as a teenager?

To answer the question we need to take a look at the context. This invitation to “ask, seek and knock” in our prayers comes toward the end of the Sermon on the Mount. At the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus calls followers to greater

righteousness than the people most serious about their faith in his day; the scribes and Pharisees (Mt. 5:20). Jesus then goes on to teach what this “greater righteousness” looks like.....what it looks like to live in the kingdom of God now.....what ways of life bring God’s kingdom now. From Matthew 5:21 to these verses on “ask, seek and knock” in Matthew 7 Jesus has been “painting the picture of this greater righteousness.” Followers of Jesus must practice forgiveness with each other (Mt. 5:21-26). They are to not look at others with lust (Mt. 5:27-30), nor lie (Mt. 5:33-37), nor get even for any wrongs suffered (Mt. 5:38-42). Following Jesus means loving enemies, and praying for them (Mt. 5:43-48). It means practicing faithfulness through generous giving, prayer and fasting, without using those practices to get attention (Mt 6:1-18). Followers of Jesus serve God, not money, don’t worry, trust God, and seek first God’s kingdom (Mt. 6:19-34). Followers of Jesus don’t judge, but rather extend the same grace to others that has been extended to them by God (Mt. 7:1-6). It is a long list. And very honestly, it is an impossible list. Followers of Jesus, then and today, are not able to do these things. But here’s the great truth; God is. And that is exactly the context and point of this teaching on prayer; “ask, seek, and knock” in your prayers for the grace and power of God to do to all these things.....to follow Jesus with greater righteousness....to live in the kingdom. Only by the power of God working in our lives are we able to do them. “Ask”....to be able to forgive others. “Seek”.....to love your enemies. “Knock”.....about trusting God and not worrying. The content of the whole Sermon on the Mount is to be the focus of our persistent “asking, seeking, knocking.” We are to pray for the grace to live the Sermon on the Mount. That’s what Jesus’ teaching on prayer is about. “Ask, seek and knock” so your life is transformed. Pray to live in the kingdom of God.....not for some cheap blank check for material blessing.

Jesus then encourages his followers to “ask, seek, and knock” in their prayers using an example for everyday life. “Notice,” he says, “what parents do. When a child asks for bread, they don’t give him a stone. Nor do they give a child a scorpion when she asks for a fish. A round stone may look like a loaf of bread. And a scorpion may look like a dried fish. But that’s not what they give. They can be trusted to give their children what they really need.” Jesus then goes on, “So if parents who are imperfect give good and right gifts to their children, how much more will the holy, gracious and good God give good gifts to you, God’s children. Ask, and trust the goodness of God.”

IV. Reflections

“Ask, seek, knock”.....it’s not about immature prayer and selfish wants.....it’s not about a blank check with God. Rather it’s about the deep desire to be changed and live into the Sermon on the Mount.....to be transformed and follow Jesus’ teaching.....to be faithful and live in the kingdom of God right here and right now.

“Ask”.....Paul asked God to “remove a thorn in this flesh”.....something in Paul’s life and ministry that troubled him greatly. Life would be easier without it. But God’s response was clear: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” (II Cor. 12:9a) The answer was not what Paul expected.....but it was what he needed to live in the kingdom.

“Seek”.....the prophet Habakkuk prays to God. Life has become very hard. The blessings of God seem few and far between. Nothing seems to be working out. The emptiness of the farm is the metaphor for the emptiness of life; no blossom on the fig tree, no grapes on the vine, no olives for oil, the wheat is sparse, the stalls are empty. Perhaps you know about that. Habakkuk prays.....and the whisper in his heart is not what he expected: “I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exalt in the God of my salvation.” (Hab. 3:18) But it is what he needed to live in the kingdom of God.

“Knock”.....Jesus is on his knees in Gethsemane. He knows what’s before him. His friends have traveled this road with him for three years.....but now they can go no further. These last few days he will travel alone. Another way would be easier. He prays, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.” (Mt. 26:39) The cup will not pass from him, but in prayer Jesus receives what he needs to live in the kingdom of God.

“Ask,”.....last Sunday evening Christian singer David Bailey shared about his journey with cancer, faith and prayer. After 12 ½ years of being “clean” of cancer, another brain tumor appeared last fall. The surgery and treatment were very difficult. Recovery is still a long and challenging road. David shared he prayed, “Why? Why now? Why after all this? God, why me?” The answer David got back was, “There’s a better question David; what now? What now David Bailey? What now?” So with his guitar, his story, and his faith, David is back writing songs and singing. There are no guarantees that the cancer will not return again. “What now?” That’s the prayer and answer David needed to live in the kingdom of God.

“Seek”.....you know I brag about you some. This past week I was writing a response to a theological paper, and in doing so mentioned that we are very diverse congregation, who somehow are able to get along just fine. We are diverse politically, diverse theologically, and diverse socio-economically. We are white collar, blue collar and no collar. We are about as diverse as we could be in this community, without the racial-ethnic diversity. (Someday it would be nice to have that too.) We are the most diverse congregation in the Presbytery. Look around. Where else would anyone find this diverse group of people gathered together in the Shenango Valley, except at First Presbyterian Church? And today we gather around our communion table together.

There are many things we could pray for.....the needs are great in our community, and in the lives of many members. But as we break bread and share juice we will look across the communion table, and see that forgiveness is greater than holding grudges, love is greater than fear, and grace is greater than criticism.....and that will be enough to live in the kingdom of God.

“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you”.....come to find out we had it right 30 years ago when we sang that song. We had it right, and didn't know it; “Seek ye 'first' the kingdom of God. Allelu, alleluia.”