

Pursuing God's Greater Righteousness

Matthew 7:7-11

May 12, 2019

Many of you remember the days before Amazon wishlists and online shopping when as we kids would circle all the new toys and games that we wanted in the JC Penny Christmas Catalog and Sears Wish Book. Just about the time that we were ready to make our Christmas lists, these full-page color catalogs would arrive in the mail. My sister would circle and initial every one of the new Barbie items, while I dreamed of owning all of the Star Wars action figures and playsets.

But there was one item that I had my heart set on above all the rest: the *All Terrain Armored Transport* or AT-AT featured in the movie *The Empire Strikes Back*. How could I resist when the catalog described this incredible toy like this:

“Giant replica of movie figure is 17 1/2 x 22 x 4 inches wide! Movable remote-operated head. Laser cannons light and pulsate. Laser machine guns turn and click. Cockpit holds 2 action figures and body can hold up to 10 Stormtrooper action figures (action figures not incl.). Articulated, posable legs bend at the shoulders, knees and ankles. Requires 2 "D" batteries.”

I fantasized about recreating the snowy battle scene from the movie with my very own Imperial Walker. I can't remember what was under the tree that Christmas of 1981, but I can tell you what wasn't there: an AT-AT. I never got that toy. But what that greedy 6-year-old kid didn't understand at the time was that this toy retailed at \$49.99, a hefty price for a piece of plastic in those days. That's when I learned that circling items in a toy catalog was no guarantee of future ownership.

I want you to have your eyes on the text this morning, so turn with me in your Bibles to Matthew chapter 7, or to page 1510 in one of the blue church Bibles, or at least look on with someone next to you that has a Bible open.

As we unpack this text together, I want you to see first of all the potential danger of reading these verses in isolation. There is a reason why we have been working through passage after passage in this series on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The danger of not considering these words in verses 7 through 11 in their larger context is that otherwise we would not know what the word “it” in verse 7 is referring to. What exactly are we to pray for when Jesus says, “ask”? What are we hoping to find when Jesus says, “seek”? What door is Jesus speaking of when he tells his disciples to knock?

As we get older the desires of our heart change. The things we want most as adults are good health, a happy family, and financial stability. And if it's not too much to ask, a few toys to enjoy as well. These are no longer added to a wishlist,

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but to our prayer list. And sometimes, like the disappointed kid at Christmas, we can become discouraged when we don't receive everything that we ask for in prayer.

How then does our experience in this area mesh with this passage of Scripture? How do we reconcile Jesus' invitation to ask, seek, and knock, and the promise that we will receive, and find, and have doors opened for us, with our experience of unfulfilled wishes and unanswered prayer? What happens if we grab a hold of Jesus' promises in verses 7 and 8, but we misunderstand or misinterpret Jesus' words of invitation in verse 7.

For some, this might mean that God becomes less of a heavenly Father and more of an impersonal deity, one who seems distant and shows little concern for the things we value most. For them, prayer feels more like a fruitless act of religious duty that has no real effect on everyday life.

For others, God becomes a wish-granting genie who is no longer the object of their praise, but instead, becomes the means to their prosperity. Prayer becomes a tool for those who distort the truth of the gospel and replace it with a "name it and claim it" theology. Health and wealth are wrongly associated with God's blessing, and suffering is rejected as a mark of true discipleship but is instead interpreted as a sign of weak or absent faith.

So if Jesus' promise in verse 8 is true that "everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened," and if Jesus is not inviting us to rub the magic lamp and claim for ourselves our share of the wealth of the kingdom, then what is it that we are to pursue in prayer?

Jesus' disciples are called to pursue the greater righteousness of the kingdom.

If the words "greater righteousness" sound familiar to you, I hope that it's because we have been repeating that phrase throughout this sermon series. It's a way of summarizing the main theme of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The Lord Jesus has been preaching on the ethics, values, and lifestyle of a disciple, one who belongs to the kingdom of heaven. Jesus' disciples are called to pursue the greater righteousness of the kingdom. That, folks, is the "it" that I believe Jesus is referring to in verse 7. Jesus' disciples are to ask for, seek after, and knock at the door of the greater righteousness of the kingdom. In other words, greater righteousness is what we are pursuing as Jesus' followers.

So let's ask the question: how do we do this? First, we need to recognize that Jesus' disciples are called to pursue the greater righteousness of the kingdom **from a place of spiritual poverty.**

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If you were with us way back in January when Pastor Jerry started this sermon series, you might recall that the first words that Jesus spoke to the crowd gathered on the mountainside were,

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 5:3, NIV).

Perhaps as we've worked our way through Jesus' sermon you've been given a better sense of your own spiritual poverty. I hope that you have sensed God's word penetrating your soul and your spirit with the razor sharpness of a two-edged sword.

Remember, it was Jesus who said that entrance to the kingdom of heaven requires a righteousness that must exceed that of the Pharisees, those who were considered to be the religious elite of the day (Mt. 5:20). It was Jesus who seemed to raise the bar of righteousness from mere lawful obedience to a purity of heart (Mt. 5:17-48). It was Jesus who exposed the hypocrisy in us that can manifest itself even in our generous giving and in the practice of prayer and fasting (Mt. 6:1-18). It was Jesus who showed us how our treasure can become the object of our devotion (Mt. 6:19-24), and how worry betrays a lack of trust in our heavenly Father (Mt. 6:25-34). And it was Jesus who opened our eyes to see how sin impairs our ability to see rightly see ourselves and how it magnifies the sin that we see in others (Mt. 7:1-5).

As one commentator notes, we are to see our own spiritual bankruptcy by the light of the Sermon on the Mount so that we will turn to God and ask for his grace, mercy, forgiveness, acceptance, and help (D. A. Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount*, p. 108).

Or as the old hymn puts it,

*Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to the cross I cling;
Naked, come to thee for dress, helpless, look to thee for grace.*

Rock of Ages, Augustus M. Toplady

If we are to obey Jesus' call to pursue the greater righteous of the kingdom, we must recognize that our pursuit begins from a place of spiritual poverty. And it's in this place that Jesus calls us blessed. Pastor and author Tim Keller says it this way:

“The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and

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accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope.” (Timothy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*)

Once we've arrived at that place of spiritual poverty we can move forward in our pursuit of greater righteousness, and it begins with prayer.

Jesus' disciples are called to pursue the greater righteousness of the kingdom **by forming a habit of prayer**. Now you might be thinking, “Didn't we already hear a sermon on prayer in this series?” Indeed! Back in early April, I had the privilege of walking us through the Lord's Prayer and the posture of a praying disciple. Here in chapter 7, even though Jesus never uses the word “prayer” in these verses, it is clear what he is calling his disciples to do.

What is less clear to us English speakers reading from our translation of Matthew's Gospel would have been obvious to Jesus' original hearers. Our Bibles say *ask*, *seek*, and *knock*, but we could translate these words as *keep on asking*, *keep on seeking*, and *keep on knocking*. In other words, the pursuit of greater righteousness is not a one-and-done quest. Discipleship is a lifelong pursuit. The longer we walk with Christ, the more we should expect to become like Christ. But none of us will graduate from the school of discipleship this side of heaven. Even the Apostle Paul said of his own pursuit of greater righteousness,

“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me” (Phil. 3:12, NIV).

Consider for a moment all of the topics that we have covered in this Sermon on the Mount series. You might be happy to know that this 5-month series is finally drawing to a close next week. And yet, we pastors have sometimes been tempted to slow down even more. There is so much that Jesus says in these three chapters that we could easily have made this a year-long series. We've looked at what the Lord Jesus has to say about love, hate, lust, faithfulness, generosity, greed, worship, idolatry, witness, worldliness, and the list goes on.

My guess is that at some point, in at least one of these sermons, you heard Jesus' call to greater righteousness, then you looked in the mirror and you didn't like what you saw. What did you do about it? Did you try harder at being more righteous? Remember, you're operating from a place of spiritual poverty. You can't try harder. You have nothing on your own to try harder with.

Jesus offers you a better solution. Pray. And then pray again. Then pray again. In other words, pursue the greater righteousness of the kingdom by forming a

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habit of prayer. Ask, and ask again. Seek, and seek some more. Knock, keep knocking, and don't stop knocking at the door until it opens. And it will open. Jesus promises us that our heavenly Father will open the door to everyone who belongs to his kingdom.

The promise is right there in verses 7 and 8. Everyone who asks for greater righteousness receives greater righteousness. Everyone who seeks to be made more like Christ will find it. Everyone who knocks at the door will have the doorway to greater righteousness opened for them.

What makes this promise true? It's not because of *how* we ask. It's not because of *how many* times we ask. It's because of *who* we are asking. We are asking our heavenly Father who loves to answer the prayers of his sons and daughters when they pursue the greater righteousness of the kingdom.

That leads us to our final point: Jesus' disciples are called to pursue the greater righteousness of the kingdom **with expectant trust in the heavenly Father.**

The way that Jesus illustrates his point and emphasizes this promise in this text seems especially relevant today as it is Mother's Day. Generally speaking, moms and dads, grandparents and guardians want what is best for their children. When a child asks his parent or guardian for something good, we expect that he will receive what is good. The child might not get exactly what she asks for, but she won't get something worse.

Yes, Jesus reminds us in verse 11 that we are evil people, not meaning that we are as wicked as we could be, but that we are sinners in need of God's grace. Nothing tends to expose our selfish hearts like parenting children. But generally speaking, even sinful parents and guardians tend to act toward their children in ways that we would deem to be good.

Jesus says that we wouldn't expect mom to serve up a bowl of gravel for breakfast instead of a bowl of cereal. We would never imagine that dad might intentionally endanger his kids by serving up a plate of poisonous snakes for supper. No, we would rightly expect that kids receive good things from those who love them.

How much more then will our perfect heavenly Father give us what is good when we ask of him? Again, in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, the good things we are to request from our heavenly Father, the good gifts we know he loves to give, is the greater righteousness of the kingdom that Jesus has been teaching us about throughout these chapters.

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Friends, this means that when you hunger and thirst for righteousness, you will be satisfied. This means that when you seek the purity of heart that Jesus describes in chapter 5, your Father in heaven will allow you to find it. When you ask God to help you learn to love your enemies, God promises to grant you that love. When you knock at the door and ask God to overcome the lust, hypocrisy, greed, worry, and judgmental attitude resident in your heart, God opens the door and invites you into a place of transformation.

Your heavenly Father loves to give you the good things he intends for you when you ask of him. You don't need to wonder what those things might be. If we listen to the words of Jesus Christ, his Son, we'll know what it means to pursue the greater righteousness of the kingdom.

Jesus' disciples are called to pursue the greater righteousness of the kingdom from a place of spiritual poverty, by forming a habit of prayer, with expectant trust in the heavenly Father. So let's ask. Let's seek. And let's continue to knock knowing that on the other side of that door is our heavenly Father who waiting to grant his Sons and daughters with the good gifts of his kingdom.