

North Fresno Church, Sermon
“I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For”
Tim Neufeld
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Introduction

Matthew 7:7-12, a concise unit contained in the Sermon on the Mount, has three smaller sections within it. I would like to look at those three sections but in perhaps an odd way--I would like to reflect on them in reverse order, starting with the end of the passage and then move to the beginning. In doing so, I'll probably be breaking a major rule of every intro to preaching class--I'm going to give you the application of the text first and then work backwards to tell you why this application is important. So, if you don't like the application I give, it will only take you 5 minutes to figure out that this is a worthless message. I'll have saved you 20-25 minutes and you can simply tune out, play with your phone, take a nap, or leave.

Matthew 7:12, Be good to each other

The main point and the key application of the text is found in 7:12. "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets." Most of us grew up as children knowing this verse as the Golden Rule. The popular American phrasing still rings out in my ears, "Do unto others and you would have them do unto you." The meaning is obvious: treat others as you want to be treated.

This, Jesus says, is the key principle of my kingdom. In a similar way, in Matthew 22 Jesus is asked by Jewish religious leaders to comment on the greatest commandment. Jesus' response is succinct, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind," and "Love your neighbor as yourself." This summarizes the whole law and the prophets.

Earlier in the Sermon on the Mount we hear, again, a similar teaching from Jesus, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Jesus is saying that the way of the kingdom is the way of love, and that followers of the kingdom operate from an ethic of love. Belief in God requires an action—love. In Jesus' day masters abused slaves, Romans oppressed Jews, men subjugated women and religious leaders demeaned followers. Not so in the kingdom—God's people are to treat others with equity, dignity, compassion and grace.

This was not an uncommon teaching for a Jewish audience. The great Rabbi Hillel, an influential teacher just prior to Jesus, was once asked to give a concise definition of Judaism. He answered by stating the Golden Rule in its negative form, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor." In other words, remember the most hurtful words ever spoken to you and imagine the most hurtful actions ever taken against you, and under no circumstances, for any reason, are you to ever say or do those things to others. What you do not want done to you should shape your ethics and actions you take toward others.

Practicing the Golden Rule isn't something you do once a day, or a quota that you reach and then don't have to be concerned for anymore. This is to be done in everything, in every time, at every place and in every circumstance. This is a way of living. It is a way of compassionate conversation, of just actions and forgiving relationships. It is the way of Grace.

Every spring I take a group of college students down to inner-city Los Angeles. On the first night of the experience we take a prayer tour of the city stopping at various schools, parks, and civic

buildings in order to learn about and pray for the city. At one stop, we stand on a sidewalk with the world famous MacArthur Park on one side and the historic Park Plaza hotel on the other. Though once a pristine playground for the upper class, today MacArthur Park is home to scores of homeless men, women and families. We typically visit late in the evening when it is cold and dark, and people are huddled together under blankets to keep warm.

Directly across the street from this scene is the Park Plaza hotel, a magnificent structure built in 1923. This hotel has no tenants; it is empty and barren. But it is still used as a party venue for the rich and famous as well as a spectacular movie set. It seems ironic that this hotel, with its magnificent lobby and grand staircase, was the location for filming the hit movie *Hotel for Dogs*. And in an even crueler irony we can look high up above the cathedral doors of the massive structure and there, chiseled in the hundred-year old stone, we find the words of the Golden Rule, "All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them." Jesus' words from Matthew 12 were never meant to be etched in either the stone of a landmark or the heart of a callous believer. The words were meant to be lived out and acted upon.

So, we have our application from the text—be people of grace in every circumstance, always treating people the way you would like to be treated, and in fact, better than they treat you.



Matthew 7:9-11, God gives good things to you

The Golden Rule is a remarkable axiom for life and a divinely inspired teaching that can revolutionize relationships if put into practice, but what was the context for this teaching? Why did Jesus issue such an ethic for living? With all of the evil in the world, why should I treat people better than they treat me? And to get even more practical, if someone cuts me off on the freeway I'm more tempted to wave back with a special gesture than extend grace and patience. When the dog next door barks at 5:00 AM on a Sunday morning I don't feel like loving my neighbor. When the mechanic says he needs \$1500 to fix my car I'm probably not in the best of moods to be a witness for the Kingdom of Christ.

Still, Jesus' rationale for this rule of living can be found in the previous three verses with a strange illustration. He asks, "Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"

Jesus appeals to the parental instincts of his audience. One of the basic necessities that parents provide for their children is food. In the first century, a lump of bread, which could look very similar to a stone, and fish, which could be somewhat like a scaly snake skin, were the basic staples of life. When your child is hungry, asks Jesus, would you play a cruel trick on him

by providing a rock? Would you give your daughter a snake? Of course not! You would, in fact, sacrifice your own food to provide for your children. Their needs come before your own. You will do everything you can to provide the best that you can for their health and well-being.

In our house Daniel has always been our little snackmeister. We have a small pantry in our kitchen that has a door on it, and when Daniel was three or four years old I had to install a lock on the door knob because he was always raiding it for goodies. We would come into the kitchen and he'd have pulled a chair or stool over to the pantry, climbed up to the highest shelf and helped himself. There was no stopping him. Even to this day we can hear him multiple times a day shouting, "Mom, can I have a snack?" And then louder, "MOM, CAN I HAVE A SNACK?!"

Last Sunday we were home after church and then lunch at a restaurant, when we heard Daniel's familiar call, "Mom, can I have a snack?" After several rounds of this an exasperated Tracy finally told him he couldn't because we had just lunch. And then came one of those moments where you feel like an absolute failure as a parent. Oops--we remembered that Daniel hadn't eaten any lunch because he didn't like the restaurant we went to. He had decided to wait until we got home to eat. The poor kid was starving! We quickly dished up some mac-n-cheese.

And so, says Jesus, will God provide for his children. He is a kind and loving parent who only wants to give good things. His compassion, forgiveness and grace, ultimately demonstrated in the cross, are lavished upon us as Paul says. We are continually gifted with salvation, life, hope, strength, power, peace and love—real love, *agape* love. And we have each other; we, brothers and sisters, are God's gift to each other for mutual love, support and edification.

We know from the previous chapter, Matthew chapter 6 that God cares for his children more than the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. Those who seek his kingdom are promised that their needs will be met and that their father will not forget them.

So, we ask again, why should we live out the Golden Rule and treat others with goodness and compassion? Because we are to show the same grace and mercy that our Father God has shown to his children. Go ahead and treat others the way you want to be treated, but ultimately, treat them the way God has treated you.

Matthew 7:7-8, Ask, Seek and Knock

We have established that God wants us to be good to one another, and in fact, treat others better than ourselves because he treats us with goodness and mercy. But if we back up still further in the passage, to verses 7-8, we find that there is something we must do before we can receive God's compassionate acts of grace. What is it that Jesus requires? Simply put, we must "ask."

There are two partners in this deal. God's job is to answer, our job is to petition. "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." We are in charge of asking, seeking and knocking; God is in charge of giving, revealing and opening. We are the actors in this scenario in as much as we come before God and make our requests known to him. But we are the acted upon when it comes to listening and waiting for God's responses. The text is clear—we act and then God acts. Making the request is something we control; the type and timing of the response is something that is out of our control.

I'm reminded of one of my favorite passages in the Old Testament, Proverbs 2:1-8.

- ¹ My son, if you accept my words
and store up my commands within you,
- ² turning your ear to wisdom
and applying your heart to understanding—
- ³ indeed, if you call out for insight
and cry aloud for understanding,
- ⁴ and if you look for it as for silver
and search for it as for hidden treasure,
- ⁵ then you will understand the fear of the LORD
and find the knowledge of God.
- ⁶ For the LORD gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.
- ⁷ He holds success in store for the upright,
he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless,
- ⁸ for he guards the course of the just
and protects the way of his faithful ones.

My child, says Wisdom the Spirit, if you accept, store, turn, apply, call, cry, look, and search, then you will understand and find God. Our job as God's children, both individually and corporately, is to use every means possible to find God. And when we do, we are promised by our Father that we will not be ignored. In essence, this is the struggle—and the joy—of each believer's life: to ask and to receive, to search and to find, to knock and to have another door opened.

This would be a nice place to end the sermon this morning. But as you might suspect, and I am well aware, there is a huge problem with this passage. What is it? Do you know? Can you dare utter the thoughts of your heart on this one? If you were to voice your concerns would you be afraid—afraid of being called a doubter, a heretic, backslider?

Let me speak the words for you: I'm not sure I believe in a God that does this. I have asked, and searched and knocked and on more than one occasion have never heard a single word back from him. Even worse, there have been times he has responded but what he gave me was something difficult and unwanted. What kind of a God is this that calls me to ask of him and then remains silent or gives me what I don't want?

This is not a simple problem, and it probably has something to do with the way we read, or don't read, the passage. This text is not a guarantee that we will get everything we ask for in the time that we want it. All attempts to force God into the role of Santa Claus will fail miserably and leave us confused and discouraged. Nor is God a grandparent that will spoil us by granting every whim and desire.

When my boys were younger we would occasionally leave them for a weekend with Tracy's parents while we went out of town. Invariably, they would come home almost unmanageable because during the course of the weekend they would get anything and everything they wanted from grandma and grandpa. I would beg my mother-in-law, "Please, just say 'no' to them once while we're gone." Not a chance. "That's not what grandmothers do," I was told. But to see God the same way is to minimize and reduce him to something that he is not, because sometimes

God is silent and sometimes he gives us what we don't want or ask for. But if that is the case, what is the point of asking at all?

King David might provide some clues. David has always been one of my heroes of the Bible, not because of his magnificent leadership skills, his expertise in military conquest or his success as a politician, but because of his honesty. It's David's human frailty and his genuineness before God that intrigues me. Though he wrote many songs and poems of celebration, praise and thanksgiving, it's his laments that are most compelling for many readers. Psalms is a book of words not from God to humanity, but from humanity to God, and David was a master of honesty and authenticity before God. He wasn't afraid to tell God anything. And when times were hard he wasn't afraid to confront God, doubt God and question God.

On many occasions David was downright angry with God. Check out Psalm 6.

- ¹ LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger
or discipline me in your wrath.
- ² Have mercy on me, LORD, for I am faint;
heal me, LORD, for my bones are in agony.
- ³ My soul is in deep anguish.
How long, LORD, how long?

- ⁴ Turn, LORD, and deliver me;
save me because of your unfailing love.
- ⁵ Among the dead no one proclaims your name.
Who praises you from the grave?

- ⁶ I am worn out from my groaning.

All night long I flood my bed with weeping
and drench my couch with tears.

Or listen to David's doubt in Psalm 13.

- ¹ How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
- ² How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me?

Here is why I like David and why I think he becomes a model for us: David was not afraid to ask the hard questions of God. He was not afraid to simply be human before the divine. David kicks at God and accuses God. "Where are you, God? Why have you deserted me? Where did you go to? How long will you ignore me? How long will you cause my suffering? How long, Lord, how long?" David gives us permission, by his example, to yell, scream, and even cuss at God. Be honest, haven't you wanted to do just that at times?

Yet, we as Christians are very cautious in our counsel to one another. We tell each other not to doubt God, not to question God, and not to complain to God. What is the most likely thing a Christian will say to a person who expresses doubts about God? Some of the answers I hear

are, "Oh, don't talk that way," or, "You just need to pray more," or, "Well, in the Bible it says...." Where is a person with questions and doubts about God the least likely to go for help? Answer: the church. This irritates me. As David demonstrates, the temple, the sanctuary, the church community is the absolute best place to go to ask questions of God. There is no better environment than being with brothers and sisters to do the heartfelt, gut-wrenching, soul-searching work of asking, seeking and knocking.

I'm not talking about irrelevant little questions like, did Adam have a belly button? or, can God make a rock big enough that even he can't lift? No, I'm talking about the kinds of questions that plague and haunt and possess our souls; the kinds of questions that keep us awake at night. Several times within the last couple of weeks I have used my Facebook account to ask both Christians and non-Christians alike to submit their questions for God. The answers were stunning and moving. Here is a sample of those responses.

"Why do children, teens and young parents die? I could answer my own question, but those answers go out the window when you watch a cousin die at 21 and a friend die at 40 leaving a wife (his high school sweetheart), 6 and 8 year old girls and a four month old baby boy."

"God--how do we forgive from our own places of brokenness?"

"Why are you not doing anything about the wars, famine, oppression, and injustice? And why is my life so much better than most of the world's? Do you care more about some people than others?"

"When will you set up your kingdom on earth and put everything right?"

"How can you call yourself merciful when you let so much pain go on in the world- and please, please, please do not say it's because of free will: monsters are created not born. The point is that as an all-powerful deity Your inaction can't be written off while deserving the title 'merciful.'"

"Why is it that it seems that so many have ignored the poor and gone against the message of peace that Jesus preached?"

"Why, through your Son Jesus, did you say we could hear your voice and recognize it, if we can't? Why did you say we could ask anything in your name and receive it, and we don't?"

"Why does pain turn some people toward you and others away?"

"What's with the evil in the world ? Was it some sort of primordial chaos that was present when God created the earth ? Is it a result of man's disobedience? I know that God eventually wins, and that His kingdom is both 'now' and 'future', but still...."

"Why haven't you come back sooner?"

I would be a fool to try and answer these weighty and important questions. Attempting detailed and rational explanations of such primal human experiences is the work of conmen and TV preachers. What I am learning from Jesus, from Proverbs and from David, is that far more important than receiving an answer is the actual asking of the question.

I have been stymied, confused, and dejected because of God's apparent silence in my own life. I remember a friend of mine relaying how he had to make an important decision in his life so he asked God for a sign one night, and sure enough, a shooting star went streaking across the sky in affirmation of the direction he was headed. But I have been up at 3:33 in the morning ("as the numbers fell off the clock face"), scouring the skies, begging God for a sign. On any night of the year I can find shooting stars, but not this night. God was quiet.

I don't know why God sometimes remains silent in hard times. I don't know why a committed and loving father loses a job and can't find another one so he can provide for his family. I don't know why a wife and mother has to suffer and then slip away into eternity while leaving other friends and family to mourn here on earth. I don't know why my friend, a female in her 30s, remains single despite her earnest and faithful prayers for a spouse to partner with her in ministry.

In the end, some questions will have no answers. You and I will be left with our pain, our confusion, and our doubt. But that is not the worst thing that can happen. Being angry at God, doubting God and questioning God is not the most awful thing that a person can do. If I'm shouting and screaming at God, at least I'm still talking to him. The worst thing that a person can do is stop talking, stop asking, stop seeking and stop knocking.

Go ahead and shout at God. He can take it. Go ahead and question God. He is big enough. But, please, never, ever stop talking to him. He would rather have you yelling and doubting, like David, than not talking at all.

For years I have followed a group of guys who are self-proclaimed seekers and wanderers. For three decades their music has asked questions of God and of their listeners. The group is U2 and the song of theirs that could be a soundtrack for my life is "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For." I think this song, as a prayer, aptly sums up our passage this morning. Listen to some of the lyrics.

I have climbed the highest mountains, I have run through the fields
Only to be with you, Only to be with you

I have run, I have crawled, I have scaled these city walls
These city walls, Only to be with you

But I still haven't found what I'm looking for

I believe in the kingdom come, Then all the colors will bleed into one
Bleed into one. Well, yes, I'm still running

You broke the bonds and you, Loosed the chains
You carried the cross, Of my shame
You took the blame, You know I believe it

But I still haven't found what I'm looking for

Let's watch a clip from their tour last year as it was filmed at the Rose Bowl (a concert that a bunch of us from this congregation were at). Notice in particular how the band turns the microphone toward the audience. Bono often talks about their concerts being a kind of church

service; fans talk about going to the sanctuary to hear U2. That night in Pasadena roles were reversed as the crowd became the performers and the band became the audience. And something remarkable happened; something very intentional on U2's part: 100,000 voices joined in a magnificent choir to say "we're asking, we're seeking, we're knocking." Some of the concert-goers understand this quest at the deepest levels of faith and commitment; others merely echo a popular lyric. But all acknowledge, as if in a unanimous, collective cry of humanity, "We're still climbing, we're still running, we're still searching."

[Video of "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" with "Stand by Me" tag]
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pqDCLF_cr90

What a beautiful prayer:

When the night has come, And the land is dark
And the moon is the only light we see
No I won't be afraid, No I won't be afraid
Just as long as you stand, stand by me

Some critique U2 and say, "See, we knew they weren't Christians; they just said so. They haven't found God yet." But I say that's exactly the kind of Christian God calls us to be—always searching, always looking, always running. When we do, he promises that he will not abandon or ignore us. When the light is gone and the night is dark, we don't need to be afraid because he is standing with us. He can be counted on to supply good things to his children, but not always in the way we expect.

Conclusion

This is the nature of the kingdom. It is here, but not fully present. It is now, but not yet. I can know God but not fully know him. And in a reflection of the way the kingdom works, I ask, and I receive—but not all that there is to receive or in the way that I always want it. I seek, and I find—but not in fullness, there will always be more to know and uncover. I knock, and the door is opened—but there will be many, many more doors to walk through on this journey with God.

A friend of mine sent me a note this last week in which she told me about her twelve-year old who has recently been diagnosed with epilepsy. Traumatized and anxious she says, "He has asked me so many times in the past few weeks - WHY? If God is so good than WHY does he give kids epilepsy? He's been very scared (we all have) and very angry (that too) with what this condition has done to our lives. As his mom I can say it's part of the plan—but as his mother I have no answers for him." And then she adds, "I get choked up every time I hear 'I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For.' I'm still running!"

God asks us to treat others with compassion and grace because that is the way he as our Father in Heaven treats us. He invites us to come to him. We are given the privilege of asking, seeking and knocking, be it out of gratitude or anger or doubt. The worst thing a person can do is be silent, for then there is no possibility of receiving, of finding, or of opening. So go ahead and talk to him. Let him know your requests. Keep calling, crying, and searching. Keep running, crawling and scaling. Keep asking, seeking and knocking. He can take whatever you have and in whatever way you come. But come.

[This sermon ended with a time of worship and a call for people in the congregation to write down their prayers. These prayers were then read out loud by two readers as the benediction for the service. The result was a kind of corporate prayer/sigh of genuine and honest emotional release. I received more than 50 prayers. What follows is a sample of those prayers.]

Benediction, Prayers of God's People

Dear God, when we die do we go directly to Heaven or do we have to wait until Christ returns. Where do our spirits go? My dad passed away last year and this one weighs heavy on my heart.

Dear God, say "hi" to my mom, dad, brother, sister, and my deceased husband, and all of my family up in heaven, and please give me Love and Strength to preserve."

Dear God, why do babies and children get horrible diseases and suffer so much, then die?

Dear God, why does this life have to be so complicated?

Dear God, why do some fall away but know the whole truth?

Dear God, why aren't my children walking with you? How do I pray for them?

Dear God, why does it take so long for family and friends to come to know God as their savior? Keep me faithful in prayer.

Dear God, if you want us to seek and find, why do you hide the answers so they are so tough to find?

Dear God, how can we feel important – though retired?

Dear God, please bring me hope and guidance.

Dear God, I feel so alone. There are millions of people around me, I have friends and I am so blessed yet I feel alone. I miss my family. I want someone to love. I want someone to love me. I want to be okay with life just the way it is, with You in it. That should be enough. But it seems it never is.

Dear God, it's not fair. How I feel. Things like this aren't supposed to happen, but they do and worse, I feel forever ruined. I know that's not true, but at times it is hard to remember. Will the pain last forever? How will I find something different? When will it end? Do I have to wait for the kingdom? Sometimes I can deal with that, sometimes not.

Dear God, I lost my husband in 2008 and just as I was learning to live again and I lost my mom, July 17, 2010. It hurts so bad. What are You showing me? What are You telling me? Even with all this pain, I still trust You with my life but I need understanding in my heart!

Dear God, I need to see You! I need to see You! Please hear me, I need to see you. I love you.

Dear God, I'm scared for what the next stop is going to be. I don't like change. Please be with me, I need you. She is in my life for a reason. Please show and guide me.

Dear God, there has been so much struggle in my life – so many hard things – is it wrong to want relief? Please help me in my selfishness.

Dear God, why oh why is my baby suffering? Please bring her peace, comfort, and hope. Let her know she is loved and worthy of love.

Dear God, why don't you heal my son of his illness?

Dear God, my heart aches and my soul is heavy. Please take care of my sister and take care of those she's left behind, including myself.

Dear God, why have you given me a call to serve, a deep longing and yet no opportunity? Am I not good enough to serve YOU?

Dear God, why am I out of work?

Dear God, thank you, for the first time I feel it's ok to feel the way I feel.