

Ask and Receive
Matthew 7:7-11; Isaiah 58:1-6
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Hamblen Park Presbyterian Church
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“Ask and it will be given to you.” (Matthew 7:7)

I often treated my parents like they were vending machines. I tried to be a nice boy. That would be like putting money in the machine. Then I asked them for what I wanted. That would be like pushing the button on the machine to make my selection. Then I expected, or at least hoped, that they would give me what I asked for. That is the moment when you wait with expectation and also with a bit of fear, hoping the machine will really work the way it is supposed to. You know that moment. If it is a soda pop machine, it is that sound of bumpity-bumpity-boom. If it is a candy bar machine, it is that moment when you get to see the candy bar drop down from its perch to the little door below. You also know the disappointment that comes when you put your money in, push the button and then all is quiet. Nothing happens. It is made even worse when the coin return button also mocks you with silence.

I think my prayer life has often paralleled a vending machine experience. I try to be good and I hope that God will give me what I ask for. When I don't get what I want, I feel very disappointed. I may cry out to God in frustration and bewilderment, “Why don't you answer my prayer and give me what I want?” Other times I deal with my frustration in silence and resignation as if God only answers certain prayers and my prayer wasn't one of them.

Unanswered prayer is a universal experience. Everyone who prays – and that is almost everyone – will experience a disappointing “No” or a deafening silence to at least one prayer.

So, how can Jesus say, “Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you?” This bold statement flies in the face of our real experience.

How can Jesus say, “Ask, and it will be given to you?” To answer this question I will point out two keys to prayer.

The first is that we are not meant to get everything we want. The second is that we need to learn to ask for what God most wants for us to have.

The first key is that we are not meant to get everything we want.

When Jesus said, “Ask, and it will be given to you,” he did not mean that we will get anything and everything we ask for. That would be a terrible world to live in – where

we all get whatever we want. That would actually be an impossible world because what I want will sometimes conflict with what you want. It would even be an undesirable world if I got everything I wanted to get. I would become even more selfish. So, Jesus' words can't mean we get everything we want.

We also see that we are not to get everything we want when we look at these words of Jesus in their context. This verse (Matthew 7:7) is part of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). This sermon includes statements such as blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you. Jesus also directs his followers to seek first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness. In contrast to the words of Jesus, we usually think we are blessed when things are going well. We are more likely to seek comfort and security rather than the kingdom of God. The Sermon on the Mount shows us that our middle class values of having what we need to be comfortable and happy are not the highest priorities in God's kingdom.

One reason we are not meant to get everything we want is because our goals are not always the same as God's goals.

My parents loved me, but they had different goals than me when it comes to what it means to be a parent. Their goal was not to be a vending machine for all my desires. Their goal was my maturity – physical, emotional, social and spiritual. They wanted me to grow up. They wanted me to learn about life in the real world and how to deal with it successfully. They were not vending machines. They were more like guides for the journey. They met my needs like a guide would do for the people on a trip. But more importantly, they pointed the way to what really matters. They knew a whole lot more than I knew. I had a lot to learn, whether or not I was willing to admit it.

God's goal for me is similar to my parents' goal. God's goal for me is my maturity. God knows a whole lot more than I do, so I need to know what God wants for me.

That brings me to the second key. We need to learn to ask for what God most wants for us to have.

What God wants for us more than anything else is for us to know God and to know God's love. God also wants us to become people who love and care for others as Jesus loved and cared for others.

Our first Scripture reading, Isaiah 58, speaks about what is important to God. God is not concerned that we appear religious and nice for the sake of getting some favor from God. (That would be the vending machine model in which being nice and religious is like the money we use to get our requests met.) God wants us to know what really counts – knowing God, loving God and loving others and ourselves. Isaiah tells us that loving others means loving them through tangible, hands-on action.

Isaiah says that religious life can become empty. Religious activities such as prayer can become an attempt to get God's favor rather than a way to get to know God and to serve God.

The people Isaiah spoke to were not trying to know God. They were trying to get their own way. While they fasted and performed their religious duties, they were oppressing their workers and fighting with each other. They were standing by as people went hungry. God was more concerned with a different kind of fast and a different kind of activity. The fast God wanted from them was not to stop eating. It was for them to stop acting with injustice, to remove the yoke of oppression and to stop overlooking the people who live on the margins of society. The activity that God wants is to feed the hungry, house the homeless and help the afflicted (verse 10).

Our prayers need to begin with wanting for ourselves what God wants for us. God wants us to know God and to know God's love through Jesus Christ. God also wants us to become people who love and care for others as Jesus loved and cared for others.

Therefore, we need to learn to ask God to help us love God, to help us serve God and to help follow Jesus.

Jesus said, "Ask and it will be given you."

Here is my prayer based on Jesus' promise. "God, more than anything else I want to know You and I want to know Your love. I want to follow Jesus and I want to love others like Jesus loved others."

I believe this is what it means to ask God for something. This is what it means to seek God. This is what it means to knock on God's door. (Repeat prayer.)

This prayer also includes specific needs related to our current situation. "God, I have trouble loving myself. Help me to know that I am loved by you." "Jesus, I find it hard to be nice to one particular co-worker of mine. Help me to see him through your eyes and help me treat him with Christian love." "Lord, my friend is very sick and needs your help. I want him to be healed, but even more I want him to know You and Your love for him. Help me to be a witness to him of the love of Christ."

Prayer is not so much about getting what we want. It is more about receiving the good gifts God has for us. So, instead of trying the vending machine approach to prayer, I want to try the "God's Kitchen" approach. I want to stop trying to get what I want from God. I want to go to God's kitchen and enjoy what God is preparing for me today. I want to let Christ give me the food he has for me and let that food nourish me so I can serve Christ faithfully.