

# Growth for the Asking

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Well, we are going to return to the Sermon on the Mount today, Matthew 7, and I invite you to turn to a magnificent text that we will spend the next two weeks on this week and next week. You know, there is a very sad perception that sometimes descends upon people who approach God and is a sad mistaken view of his character that can even infect Christians, especially as they are going through trials, to view God as someone stingy and unwilling to help them; to view God as someone who is a somewhat irritable God and perhaps not too inclined to be sympathetic to them in their need. Well, this passage will give the lie to all of that. You know, one of the essential things that you as a Christian should have is a sense that God is great, yes, but that God is also very good and he is very loving and gracious to his children, and that he has a receptive ear to us when we come to him, especially coming for the right things, and we need to see that from this text as Jesus describes for us exactly what our Father is like in Matthew 7, beginning in verse 7.

Jesus says,

7 "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. 9 Or what man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? 11 If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!"

Jesus here is teaching about prayer but in a way that we must understand carefully. What he is teaching us here is not simply how to get any material need that you want, in fact that's not his point at all. Jesus is instructing us, instructing his people who know God through faith in Christ, he is instructing his people how to pursue spiritual growth. You see, this is a very narrow promise that he is making, in some respects. This is a prayer that each person who is a Christian, each person who is in the kingdom, each person who is a disciple of Christ, should understand how to go about developing and cultivating their inner man, cultivating their spiritual life, and that's what we want to see over the next couple of weeks here. I want to help you see that.

I realize that there are those who would make this, turn this into a promise to name and claim whatever you want, after all it says, "Ask and it will be given to you." But that's not at all what Jesus is talking about. The starting point for this text is to understand two things: one is to understand exactly what it is that Jesus is talking about when he says, "Ask and it will be given to you," what is this "it" of which he speaks; but also to recognize that you need this "it" of which he speaks. So we need to review a little bit of context here and if you're new to our church, if you haven't been here for our study of the Sermon on the Mount, this is a great day for you to be here as we go back and review a couple of things. The thing to see is that Jesus in this sermon, Matthew 5, 6 and 7, Jesus is speaking to his disciples; he is speaking to those who understand that they have a bankruptcy of spirit.

Look at chapter 5, verse 3. It says in verse 2 that Jesus "opened His mouth and began to teach them," teach his disciples, "saying, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'" He says the kingdom of heaven belongs to those who realize that they have no spiritual merit of their own. They are poor in spirit. They are struck by poverty; that they have no spiritual resources of their own. You compare your spiritual bankruptcy, the fact that you're a sinner and fall short of the glory of God, you realize that there are forces of evil and sin and lack of self-control within you that you have no power over, you realize those things about yourself and then you realize that the call of God on every man, woman, boy and girl, is this incredibly high standard of righteousness that this is what God requires of the inner man. And you see this, chapter 5, verse 6, Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." Look down at chapter 5, verse 20, he says, "I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." Chapter 5, verse 48, he says, "you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." And he goes in chapter 6, verse 1 and says, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven." Matthew 6:33, he says, "seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."

Do you see the repeated theme that he keeps coming back to again and again as he courses through this magnificent sermon? It's righteousness. It's a matter of personal righteousness that he's calling us to, to aspire after a standard of life, a standard of the inner man, a standard of living that comports with the righteousness of God himself. Well, as we read Scripture, we understand that none of us meet that standard but each one of us falls magnificently short of that, staggeringly short of that in a way that makes us unable to come to God on our own and we realize that we need a Savior; we realize that that is why Christ came, that Christ came to fill the gap between our sinfulness and the holiness of God and that only through faith in Christ, only through the work of someone else can we ever find ourselves in a position where we are acceptable to a holy God. There should be none of us in this room, none of us over the live stream, that should have the mistaken view of ourselves that we are good enough for God because we're not. The fact is that we fall very very far short.

Now, as Jesus goes through this sermon and when you come to Matthew 7:7, I want to kind of quantify for you here how magnificent the standard of the righteousness of God is and to give you this sense that you do not meet it, that you do not have these kinds of resources within yourself, within your own heart. You remember as we opened the service, we said God desires we worship in spirit and in truth, well, the only way that we can start, we need to understand the truth about God, he is holy and high and lofty, and understand also a measure of truth about ourselves, that we are sinful and low and that we fall short. And as you go through the Sermon on the Mount, you find this brought out to you in this particular way that I'm about to describe to you that is really quite remarkable. I keep coming back to the magnificence of it, the magnificence of the righteousness of God, and there is a magnificence, this is kind of a strange word to use to describe it, but there is a magnificence about how far short we fall about it. What I mean by that is just that the themes are so lofty and transcendent.

When you come to Matthew 7:7, Jesus has laid out this righteousness in ways that you would miss, perhaps. By the time you come to Matthew 7:7, from Matthew 5:3 to Matthew 7:7, Jesus has done this, and I'm not big on laying out statistics in sermons but here is one time where I think it's helpful. When you come to Matthew 7:7, Jesus has done this in his teaching: he has already given us, he has already by the time you get to Matthew 7:7, he has already given 15 different character traits that are to mark his disciples; he has given 49 positive commands that are to mark their lives; he has given 27 negative commands, "Don't be like this"; and he has asked 14 questions to his disciples all in this short two chapters, two and a half chapters, if you will, Matthew 5, 6 and 7, and said this is the standard of God for your lives. Now, that's pretty amazing. If you do the math on that, that's a total of 105 searching standards that Christ says, "This is what is required of my disciples," before you get to this text in Matthew 7:7.

Now, beloved, think about yourself and think about your own soul and think about your own mind in light of what I just said. We've been teaching on this sermon for about a year now, give or take, and here's the situation that you and I find ourselves in in response to the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ. Here's our situation that we're in: we can't even recite those 105 standards, let alone keep them. There is not a one of you that could say, "Yes, I can number these from 1 to 105 and I can name them in perfection." The truth of the matter is your mind doesn't go there; your mind doesn't grasp the fullness of everything that Jesus has said. You and I, we don't even know them in this comprehensive way to have them ever present simultaneously all in our minds all at once. We don't even know them and Jesus says this is how you are to be; character, do this, don't do that. Wow, you don't even know them let alone keep them, let alone be them. You see, the standard of God, the problem is not the standard of God, the problem is not that Jesus is being unfair in his teaching. You go back through this text, you could go back and listen to this whole series that we've done, it's about 50 messages, everything that Jesus has said in this sermon is right. It is true. It is the way that things should be. It is the way that his disciples should be and what they should do with their lives and the way that they should trust God and not be anxious over life. Everything about what Jesus says is perfect and right, the problem is that you and I are finite and sinful and we fall short of everything that he says. That's the problem.

Think about it this way. I like this example. When you and I come to the Sermon on the Mount, we come to Matthew 7:7 and there are 105 things that Jesus has said, what is it like spiritually? Well, it's like this, it's like having someone come and bring about seven buckets of baseballs and setting them before you and saying, "I want you to hold all of these baseballs simultaneously." You can pick up maybe five or six. You can put a couple in your pockets, maybe. Put a few in your shirt. But sooner or later you start dropping these baseballs because you cannot hold them all in your hands. You just do not have the physical capacity to do that. The Christian finds himself even as he loves the word of God, even as he loves the Christ who calls him to this standard of living, the Christian finds himself in a similar position. You find yourself in a similar position when you see yourself rightly in light of the word of God, you realize that as lovely and as desirable and as attractive as this entire sermon is, I find that I just do not have the resources in myself to live this way to perfection and you go, "Oh, now what? This is lofty. This is high. This is what I desire. I want this but I'm inadequate for it. What do I do?" Well, it is here at that point that Jesus speaks these words of Matthew 7:7. You realize that you are inconsistent. You realize that your temper gets the best of you. You realize that your heart betrays you. You realize that you have fallen short and it can be crushing to recognize those things about yourself.

Now, when Christians, speaking generally, just broadly speaking about the evangelical church in Western culture and probably any other culture as well, when you start to recognize that, you do something. You go one or two or three different ways, I would venture to say. When you try to address this spiritual need that you have, you almost always go the wrong direction. You double down on yourself and on your own self-effort. Some people will see that and they decide to try harder. "I can't hold all of these 105 baseballs, I can't keep all of these things that Jesus says, but I'm going to try harder. I'm going to have a longer quiet time. I'm going to get up earlier. I'm going to pray longer." A lot of you have gone down that path, haven't you? Self-effort. Self-discipline. That may last for a while but you haven't been a Christian very long until you realize that that fizzles out at some point. You get sick, work calls you away, whatever, and you're back to your own inability to fulfill your own effort to try to do these things.

Others become cynical and indifferent. "What is the use of this if it's impossible? I'll just confess my sins and I'll not worry about it and I'm just going to go on and live my own way." What some people do is they will change their theology to accommodate their inability to live a righteous life and they will say, "Well, righteousness then doesn't matter and I'll find a perverse teacher to teach what I want so that I can do what I want here. What's the use if this is impossible?" And God's forgiveness simply becomes an excuse for spiritual mediocrity and people set aside the law of God and the teaching of Christ just so they can live any way that they want to. That can't possibly be right. Did Jesus teach us these things just so that they could be set aside? Did the eternal Son of God speaking eternal truth do it so that a sinful poverty-stricken man could set it aside at his whim? That can't be right.

And still others, putting some of you, I know, fall into a sense of despair, of morbid introspection. You desperately want to have this righteousness be a mark of the way that you live and yet you find that you fall short and it discourages you and it crushes you and leaves you not knowing where to go next. Wow, that sounds pretty bleak, doesn't it? It is kind of bleak when we are looking at it from those perspectives.

Very few people will actually take seriously what Jesus says here in Matthew 7:7 and realize that even as he has laid forth this lofty standard for us, he has laid before us the means of provisions that God has given us. Few Christians will do what will actually help them to grow. Few Christians even know what the key to spiritual growth is. And you see, ultimately where all of this is designed to bring you, what the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount does, what we've been doing for a whole year here is designed to bring us to precisely this point that I am about to lay out before you. Your spiritual poverty which is undeniable in light of what we've said here today, you don't even know, you can't even begin to recite 105 character traits, commands both positive and negative, you can't even begin to recite that, and if you can't even recite it, how can you know that you are living it, right? How can we know that we are living it if we can't even recite it? This is only three chapters out of 260 in the New Testament. Your spiritual poverty, beloved, is this: your spiritual poverty as you start to recognize it and it starts to explode on your conscience like that, your spiritual poverty is designed to be a lesson in grace. It is designed to be a lesson in grace and a lesson in humility that brings you to a point where you humble yourself in your heart as you think about yourself, you realize, "I am not what I ought to be." You humble yourself vertically before God, "God, you are high and lofty and I am unworthy of your presence."

Ian Murray, that great Christian biographer, said this and I quote, "The mature Christian is the one who knows more dependence on Christ alone. Christ in him is his only strength. They that have most grace are those who are conscious that they, in and of themselves, are nothing, have nothing, can do nothing, and see daily cause for abhorring themselves." You see, as you recognize your spiritual poverty, you realize that there cannot be anything good in me that commends me to God. You realize that there cannot be any source of spiritual power that I possess in and of myself that would enable me to fulfill these things. You know, the longer you go, the more you see it. You say, "I've been a Christian 5 years, 10 years, 20, 30, 50 years, and after all of that time, here I am."

That, beloved, that, my friend, is where Matthew 7:7 through 11 come into the picture. That is why Jesus speaks these words at this time in this particular sermon. God knows your poverty. Christ knew your poverty and inability when he said these things and he has brought you to the point where you despair of your own strength, you despair of your own ability, and you look up for grace to supply that which you cannot do on your own. That is the point of these words here that Jesus says.

Let's look at the first two verses which is where we're going to spend all of our remaining time this morning and then we'll pickup verses 9 through 11 next week. Look at verse 7 with me again in light of what we've said. Jesus says,

7 "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened."

Who is Jesus speaking these words to? Who are these promises addressed to? This is not addressed to the world in general. This is not addressed to any unbelieving mate, in honor of our Australian friends, this is not for any bloke going down the street who has no regard for God, Christ or his holiness. It's not about that. That's not who Jesus has been talking to. Jesus is still talking here in Matthew 7 to the same people he has been addressing all along, those who recognize that they are poor in spirit; who mourn over sin; who hunger and thirst for righteousness; who are seeking first his kingdom and his righteousness. That's who he's talking to and he is talking to them here in Matthew 7:7 about the same theme that has been animating the sermon all along, this call to personal righteousness that is the mark of the disciple of Christ, that is the mark of the one who truly belongs to the kingdom of God.

So the theme is where does this righteousness come from? Where do I find the power to live in a way that I know I don't have the power to do? That's what he's addressing here and it is there that Jesus says, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened." How do you bridge the gap, you as a Christian between what God calls you to as he calls you to live a righteous life in response to the grace that has been given to you, and you find your own inability causing you to stumble and being an obstacle at every step of the way? Where do you bridge that gap? You ask. You ask. You ask for help from the storehouse of God's grace and I want to show you in these two verses three aspects of the kind of prayer that Jesus is calling us to here. And it's convicting to me too lay these things out before you; it's convicting to hear these and yet this is done in grace; these are words of grace from our Lord showing us where the concentration of our prayers should be, where the desires of our heart should be, and Jesus is shaping us into being dependent disciples of our Lord.

Now, what is Jesus talking about here in verses 7 and 8? Well, first of all, I want you to see that it is a spiritual request. It is a spiritual request, and I'm going to repeat myself a little bit from what I've already said. Jesus says, "Ask, and it shall be given to you." Well, beloved, the most, in some ways, the most important thing that you could do as you hear these verses taught, as you read them in the Scriptures in the days to come, is to drop your earthly baggage at the door before you enter in; to realize that this is not inviting you to simply say, "What would I really like in an earthly sense? I'd like more prosperity. I would like better health. I would like, you know, my loved ones to have a happy life," or whatever. Understand that Jesus has conditioned us through the prior two and a half chapters to be thinking in a spiritual way and to be thinking about righteousness. That is his focus and that is the substance which he is promising to us here. It's not a promise of prosperity. It's not a promise of health, physically speaking. This promise is defined by everything that has gone before it to give us a sense of where the righteous living that we need comes from, and so this is not an invitation to seek every materialistic desire. It's not inviting you to use this verse as a promise, "I want a new job. God, I'm asking you for a new job. I'm asking you for a spouse. I'm asking you for other earthly things." That has

nothing to do with what Jesus is talking here and the context makes that undeniably clear. He is teaching you here, beloved, to seek growth in your personal righteousness through prayer and the spirit of the prayer is something like this, "God" – oh, beloved, hear me, hear me – the spirit of the prayer is this, "God, I want what Jesus describes in the Sermon on the Mount to be true of me. I want to be someone who is marked by mourning over my sin. I want to be someone who hungers and thirsts for righteousness. I want to be someone whose righteousness exceeds the external trappings of the scribes and Pharisees. I want my inner man to be pure of anger and lust, not simply being somebody who avoids the external sins that those things lead to. God, I want to be someone who does not store up treasures on earth but I want to be someone who stores up my treasures in heaven. God, I want to be somebody who does not live going through life filled with anxiety but knows something about what it means to trust you to care for my every need. God, that's what I want. I want to be like that because that inner quality of life is high and lofty and desirable and that is the kind of man I would be, that is the kind of woman I would want to be. Even though no one around me is like it, Lord, I find that attractive and that's what I want. I want that to be true of me. I want that kind of righteousness, Lord. I want to be like that. I want to be someone different from the sinful kind of person that I was before you saved me. I want to be something other than this person that is animated by fleshly and carnal things in my life. I want to transcend this world. I know that I'm going to be in it but, Lord, I don't want to be of it. I don't want to philosophies of this world to mark the way I think. I don't want the aspirations of the sinful materialistic world to be that which I seek after. And yet, Lord, here I am in my fallen flesh and I realize that what I want is completely beyond my human power to achieve."

You see, sooner or later, beloved, you should come to this point in your Christian life where you get tired of being like what you've been; you get tired of the spiritual failure, the spiritual indifference, the spiritual mediocrity; get tired of confessing sin again and again and again and again and again and again, and all of that spiritual fatigue humbles you to the point of seeking grace; saying, "God, I need outside help. I need help from you because I'm incapable of this on my own." And what Jesus is saying is that when you come to that point, ask for the grace that will change you. Ask for the help that will transform you. Here's the simplicity of the point here: if you want true spiritual growth, beloved – let me back up and put it this way – if you want to do something more in your spiritual life than just have an attainment chart, "I read my Bible today. I read through the Bible this past year. I prayed 15 minutes or 30 minutes," or whatever it is that you think is the standard. If you want something more than that and you want something more than just another external list that leads you to pride and boasting, "I did it!" and you throw your arm out of socket patting yourself on the back over your spiritual attainments, if you want something more than that and you want the reality and substance of what Christ speaks about in the Sermon on the Mount, living in a trusting way, living in a humble way, living with a heart oriented toward righteousness, if you want that kind of spiritual growth, the real kind, Jesus says you have to ask for it. We've already established that you can't do it on your own. If you want that kind of spiritual growth, you have to ask. That means that you have to humble yourself. That means when you fall on your knees it's no longer asking, "God, fill this void in my earthly life. God, fill this void in my heart. Fill this void in my spiritual life. God, I want to be a godly person. I want to live

righteously. I've come to faith in Christ. I know that you accept me through the righteousness and the shed blood of Christ but, Lord, there is so much more. There is a gap in who I am, between what you have declared me to be and what I actually am. Lord, I'm asking you to change me, to conform me more and more to the righteousness that you yourself call to me. You've set the standard, Lord, supply what's necessary for me to meet it." It's a spiritual request.

Jesus says, let me remind you, look at Matthew 6:33 again. He says, "seek first His kingdom and His righteousness." This is the priority. This is the priority in prayer. I realize that our hearts and our lives and our desire for comfort and all of that inform the way that we come to the Lord, you know, "Lord, fix this earthly thing that I've got going on." And I realize that if you're like me, this true spirit of what Jesus is calling us to is something that you routinely neglect in your spiritual life. Well, God has given us his word to help us, to correct us, to take our eyes that are focused here on the earthly thing and say, "No, look over here where the reality is; that this is what it's about." "Whether in poverty or in plenty, Lord, I want to be a righteous man. I want godliness. I want to grow in my sanctification." Jesus says, "If that's what you want, you have to ask," and it humbles you. It humbles you. You can't boast before God, "God, look at what I've done." You can't boast in your heart, "Lord, I fall short here. I'm not what I ought to be," and it humbles us before each other, it humbles us before men, that we don't proclaim our own righteousness this way. We forfeited that claim.

Beloved, let me step back and just say this: to become a Christian at all, to become a Christian in the first instance is to forfeit any claim that you have to your own righteousness. To become a Christian is to say, "I am not righteous. I am a sinner under the condemnation of God. Have grace and mercy on me through our Lord Jesus Christ because I deserve condemnation." That's the starting point of being a Christian. You've already forfeited any claim to righteousness. Well, you carry that spirit forward into your Christian life as well. "Lord, I still fall short. I need a different aspect of your grace to conform me, to change me, to make me like what you want me to be. And just as I asked for salvation as a beggar, Lord, I come to you now as a child and ask with a similar poverty of spirit, help me become what you would have me to be because it is beyond my ability to do it." This is utterly humbling. This is what Ian Murray was speaking about, casting yourself dependently upon Christ in the midst of your inadequacy and saying, "I am depending upon you alone to help me. This is what I want. Won't you help me?" It's a spiritual request.

Now secondly, what we're going to see is that it is a sustained request. It is a sustained request. This is really crucial for you to understand. English, the English language, has difficulty in many ways, but it has a particular difficulty in doing justice to what Jesus is saying here in these two verses. When you read these verses in your English Bible, you could understand it as something that is a one time request: ask and you will receive. "Well, God, I ask you to make me like this," and you go forward and you never come back to it again. "I asked and so apparently I'm going to receive," might be the way. "One request, one answer. That's simple enough. Wow, was that easy. All of this effort and all I needed to do was one time say those magic words and it would be mine, never to be

troubled by my sinful nature again." Wouldn't that be great? Actually it wouldn't because that's not true. It's not good to want things that aren't true. You see, that one request, one answer thing is not what the underlying Greek text means at all. All the commands in verse 7 are present tense imperatives in the original language. That has a great significance for what we're talking about here. This will revolutionize the way that you think about these things. Those present tense imperatives are calling for repeated action. They are calling for continual action: do this again and again and again. The spirit of these commands that Jesus gives is like this: ask and keep on asking, and it will be given to you; seek and keep on seeking, and you will find; knock and keep on knocking, the door will be opened to you.

That's really significant. Beloved, what Jesus is teaching you here is not to make a one time request under the press of an emotional reaction to a one time sermon like this. He's doing this – oh, listen to me carefully; there is so much at stake with what I'm about to say and more importantly, the way that you respond to it – what Jesus is doing here in verse 7 and verse 8 is he is cultivating an attitude of dependence in those who realize they cannot fulfill the righteousness of God alone. He is teaching his disciples to have a settled repeated attitude of dependence, of need, of trust as they come to him again and again and again. "God, I understand that I can't fulfill this and so I ask you to help me today." Monday comes, "God, I realize that I still can't fulfill this, I'm asking you again to help me fulfill it." That's in the morning, at noon, "God, I still need your help. Cultivate in me, give me this righteousness of which you speak." January comes and goes, February, you come to July and you're still saying the same thing. It's still the same attitude. Ask and keep on asking. Seek and keep on seeking. Knock and keep on knocking. This is part of the way that Jesus is teaching us to seek first his kingdom and his righteousness. It is through this ongoing sense of dependence that this is a repeated priority of yours in prayer. "God, I want to be like this. God, help me. God, give me the spiritual resources that are necessary. Strengthen me. Subdue my flesh. Overcome my sinfulness that I might start to taste more and more of this glorious righteousness which Christ has called me to." It's a sustained request about spiritual things. It is a repeated request about righteousness. It is an ongoing prayer for an ongoing need.

Now as a side note in this text, look at verse 7 with me again. I could have read it again. We'll do that now. As a side note it says, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened." This is a side point but it's an important side point and I'm trying to help you as you perhaps hear others teach on this passage to understand something very very important. There are some well-meaning Bible teachers who see a progressive urgency in Jesus' words here and they approach the passage like this: they say if you want it, you ask for it. You seek if you're really serious about it, though. You know, you can ask and that's kind of the preliminary effort that you make, but then you seek it because it's even more important than you realized, and then you start knocking because it's just absolutely urgent to you. So they would see a progressive development of urgency through the different verbs: ask, seek and knock. So in their understanding, knocking is the most crucial verb in this whole passage and you start to knock when you're really really serious about this righteousness.

Can I tell you a secret? That's not what Jesus means here. That's not what he's talking about. It's actually no secret, we're talking about it publicly, right? Exegetically that simply does not work. If knocking was the climax of this passage, you would expect "it" to be the key verb. You would expect "knocking" to be the key verb. But it's not. "Ask" is the key verb. "Ask" is the verb that is repeated in each of these five verses. Look at verse 7, "Ask, and it will be given to you." Verse 8, "everyone who asks receives." Verse 9, "his son asks for a loaf." Verse 10, "he asks for a fish." Verse 11, "how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him." You see, the repetition of the verb shows that asking is the key verb here and you cannot make it so that knock is somehow higher than asking when all through this passage Jesus is saying ask, ask, ask, ask.

These Bible teachers, these brothers who say you've got to knock if you're really going to get it, are overlooking the fact that Jesus keeps going back to the verb ask. Why is that so important? Why do I make a point of this? Why would you need greater knocking if simply asking guarantees the answer? Why would you have to get to knocking if Jesus says repeatedly, "If you ask, you will receive. If the son asks, the father will give it to him. Your Father will give what you need if you ask." This is really important, beloved. This is really critical for you to see and understand. Why do I make that point and why do I spend so much effort on making that? Isn't it just a little difference of opinion on the meaning of a passage? "You say ask is the important verb, someone else says knock is the important verb. Pastor, can't we move on here?" Well, no we can't, not just yet. We can't move on just yet. You see, to say that asking is an entry level desire, seeking is intermediate, and then the advanced doctoral work is when you are knocking, that sets up a pattern that is the exact opposite of what Jesus is teaching here. You see, this is very practical and every one of you who has had any spiritual desires in your life will relate to what I'm saying. Jesus is not calling you in this passage to try harder in prayer and that's what this progressive thing of asking, level I; seeking, level II; knocking, level III, that multi tiered, that multilevel thing might work in Amway in multilevel marketing, that might work someplace else, it doesn't work here. That is not what Jesus is telling you is that if you haven't received it, you've got to try harder and try even harder after that. The whole point of this passage is that you cannot attain it on your own. This is a statement of grace, not a statement calling you to try even harder when you recognize your failure.

What's he saying, then, this ask and keep on asking? This seek and keep on seeking? This knock and keep on knocking? Watch this, beloved, this is gorgeous. This is beautiful. What's he saying when he says that? Asking, seeking and knocking are all different ways of simply expressing the same idea. He is teaching you the value, he is calling you to an attitude of patient consistency in your request. "Ask and keep on asking. Let me give you a different picture, seek and keep on seeking. I'll tell you the same thing from a different way of looking at it, knock and keep on knocking." He is teaching you to sustain your request for grace over time. If it seems like the door hasn't been answered at your first knock, knock again. If you haven't found it with your first seeking, seek again. If you didn't get the answer to your question the first time, the answer to your request, ask again. You see, it's the same idea just three different perspectives on doing it. The whole idea is

rooted in ask and keep on asking; knock and keep on knocking; seek and keep on seeking.

And here's what all of this means, we're going to tie a big bow around everything that we've said so far. As you, beloved, as you are seeking this spiritual growth in your life and you inevitably find multiplied stumbles along the way because Scripture says James 3:2, we all stumble in many ways, we stumble often, we stumble in a lot of different ways and it's very easy to get very discouraged along the way, isn't it? To feel the crushing weight of your own sin when you are seriously, earnestly, sincerely desiring righteousness, and I stumble again and again and again and I am just so frustrated. Jesus speaks this word of grace into it and says, "My child, here's what you are to do, you are to ask for grace from God in the midst of that. And yes, you will stumble again and ask for more grace. And you'll have periods where it seems to be going well, and ask for grace and ask for grace and ask for grace again and again and again."

You see, spiritual growth requires the help of the Holy Spirit. You cannot sanctify yourself in your own power or by your own efforts. Yes, you must put forth effort. Yes, you need to read your Bible. Yes, you need to pray. But you need the help of the Holy Spirit to help you to make that process work and to have power in it so that there is a real lasting change that comes to you, that lasting change that every true Christian somewhere in his heart really wants to happen. I know I do, don't you? I don't want to keep being this mediocre Christian that I am. I don't like this lukewarm spirit that so often animates me, who I am inside. I don't like that. I want to change.

But we need the help of God to do that and here is where you need to pay attention. I point my finger to encourage you, not to be rude. Beloved, do not expect a one time blessing to come that will settle your sanctification for the rest of your life. Some of you have probably heard that teaching. There are plenty of people over the years that teach it. That's not the way it works. You don't expect a one time blessing to settle your sanctification forever. You see, God has designed it so that you would learn a daily dependence on him, a daily coming back and saying, "God, this is the desire of my heart. Help me live righteously here. Help me to grow spiritually here. Conform me to the image of Christ here." Again and again and again. And here's the genius of what Jesus is saying: God meets your ongoing dependence with an ongoing supply given out day by day, moment by moment. Just as the children of Israel as they walked through the wilderness, day by day God gave them manna to eat; day by day they had to go out and gather what they needed for their physical sustenance during those 40 years in the wilderness. Day by day they had to go out and gather. The idea is that in an ongoing way, you go out and you gather, you go out and ask, "God, help me be this way."

Now, for many of us if not for most of us, this is really radical. This requires a complete rethinking of what our priorities in prayer are. "God, help me get through this difficult situation. God, heal Aunt Flo's crooked ankle." And we just realize, you know, you compare those things to the loftiness of which Christ says and we just realize, "Wow, my prayer life is impoverished. I'm asking for superficial earthly things when there is something far greater at stake." You know, look, I'm sympathetic to Aunt Flo and her

difficult ankle. I really am, whoever Aunt Flo is. But if that's what's animating most of your prayers, you're really missing the point. And this isn't just the way we pray for ourselves, this is the way we pray for each other. "God, look at the difficulties in their life. I pray that you would sanctify them to the good of their souls. God, he is experiencing so much prosperity and I'm glad for that but, God, help him to grow in righteousness. Father, sanctify them in the truth. Your word is truth. God, 2 Peter 3:18, help them to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." You see, I know that many of you pray for me and I'm very grateful for that but I don't really...if you want to pray for my health, great. If you want to pray that God would help me, great. Thank you. I appreciate that. But if you really want to pray for me, pray that I would grow in righteousness. Pray that God would sanctify me more and more. That's how I pray for you as well.

And we pray this way over time and what this does is we recognize our spiritual need and we request God's grace with a sustained, repeated, ongoing request for spiritual growth. "God, I haven't arrived. I need your help to grow still more." And so that prayer sustains you when you are up, it sustains you when you are stumbling. "God, here I am stumbling. I need to dust myself off of more sin. God, you see why I was praying this way before, I'm renewing it now." This prayer is always in season. This is always the right way for you to pray, "God, conform me. God, help me. God, change me that I might become more and more the righteous person that you want me to be." And this becomes what you want more than anything. I've said in the past multiple multiple times, at least twice, what a person prays for is really revealing where their heart really really is, what they really really want. "God, I have this magnificent blessing of access to you through Christ." If you have that access and you know that God answers, then what is it that you ask for? Is it the lofty things of which Christ speaks in the Sermon on the Mount or is it stuff that is going to pass with the using?

So you think about it, there is kind of a gateway as you enter into the courtyard of prayer. You walk through this gate that says, "Why is it that I'm coming in here? What is it that I want as I step into this garden where God receives prayer?" I'm thinking before I pass through that gate, "Lord, what is it that I want here? Lord, what I want is I want to smell the sweet perfume of the roses of righteousness manifesting themselves in my life. God, I want to see the beauty of transformation in my soul that I would be more like Christ. That's what I want as I pray here."

So it's a spiritual request that you sustain over time and the fact, here's the grace in it, here is some of the grace in it, my friends, is the fact that you stumbled doesn't mean that you can pray that way. It doesn't exempt you or mean that God won't receive your prayer. You're just seeing once again the fact that your dependence and your need has been manifested before you, and in the consciousness of your need, into that very point of failure, Jesus says, "Ask, and it will be given to you." Jesus says, "Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened." And you ask and you pray that way over a period of time and do you know what you find? You don't find perfection in a day but as this becomes what animates you, you find that a year from now you're a little more sanctified than you were today. Five years from now, you've grown in grace. Your

priorities have changed. Your desires are more consistent. You love Christ more. You're more faithful in evangelism or you're more faithful to the people of the Lord and you have changed over time and that becomes the source of your encouragement. "I'm not perfect yet," you say. "Okay, but do you know what? I'm not what I used to be. Praise God for that. I'm not what I should be. I'm not what I will be when I'm glorified. But praise God, I'm not what I was." And that is the spirit in which we pursue these things.

So it's a spiritual request, it's a sustained request. Point 3, here's the best part: it is a sure request. It is a sure request by which I mean God answers this kind of praying. You see it three times in Matthew 7:7. Look at it again with me, Matthew 7:7, "Ask," keep on asking and here's the promise, "it will be given to you; seek," keep on seeking, "and you will find; knock," keep on knocking, "and it will be opened to you." You know, these are passive verbs, the first and the last one are passive verbs. It will be given to you. It will be opened to you. Who is it that's doing the giving? Who is it that's doing the opening? The God to whom you pray. You see, when we pray this way we are laying hold of a great promise from God that says, "I will answer and bless a sustained request for spiritual growth. I will do that," he says.

So three times: it will be given to you; you will find; it will be opened to you. Those promises are unqualified. God will produce the change that you seek when you come to him with this kind of request. And Jesus reinforces the promise in the next verse, verse 8, "For," he says because, let me reinforce what I just said in verse 7. Here I'll say it again in verse 8, "For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened." Jesus puts the credibility and the truthfulness of God on direct display and stakes the veracity and the integrity of God on what he says here. He says, "Everyone who asks in this manner, will receive. He who seeks in this manner, will find. To him who knocks, it will be opened." Everyone who asks receives. He who seeks, finds. It is opened to him who knocks.

Now, this is glorious because it means something to every one of you. It means something to every lowly Christian, perhaps overlooked by the world; perhaps alone in many ways in your walk with Christ; without much encouragement around you, perhaps in your family, your loved ones oppose you and fight against you. Oh, just so much resistance, to say nothing of your own spiritual inadequacy inside. Beloved, Jesus says everyone who asks will receive. This is not a promise reserved for the prominent. This isn't a special enclave where only the pastor can go in. This is as open to you as it is to me. This is open to you as it is to John MacArthur or any other Bible teacher anywhere in the world. This is something that God promises to every one of his children. This is not something that is earned through earthly stature. This is something that is received when his humble child comes and humbly asks. This is not excluded from brand new Christians.

And beloved, just as your request is ongoing, God's provision for this kind of spiritual growth, this spiritual change, is also ongoing. He gives today. He gives tomorrow. He gives repeatedly. As you continually ask for grace to change, God continually gives it to you. He may portion it out a little more deliberately than what you might like but see

where Jesus is telling us, "Look at this over the long haul. Do this again and again and again. Do this in a way that says this is my life goal and I will walk step by step along the way seeking it. I will gather the spiritual manna day by day." That's the spirit of this.

So, beloved, we come to this key question addressed to every Christian in the audience in this room, over the live stream, over anyone who hears on subsequent media: would you grow spiritually? Would you like to change spiritually? Would you like to see yourself more sanctified? Is that what you want? Don't answer that question too quickly but when you find that the answer is, "Yes, that is what I want. That is what I would have from God," beloved, here's the thing: God's answer to that request of your heart is, "Yes." He will give it to you. This kind of spiritual growth of which we have been speaking, beloved, it is yours for the asking.

Let's bow together in prayer.

*Father, we'll see more on these things next week, of course, but for now I just pray that you would stir within each heart a desire for this spiritual change, this growth in righteousness of which our Lord Jesus has spoken. This is what you have saved us for in this life, Lord, not so much for what we do but who we would become; not so much for our actions but what we are to be. And Lord, as a church, as a congregation, as a man before you, myself, I ask you, we ask you, to supply this kind of grace, to transform us, to change us from one image of Christ to an even closer reflection of who he is. Work in our hearts in a way that this is our one, true, sole, ultimate desire, to seek first your kingdom and your righteousness. Teach us with that desire settled to ask more and more as we seek it and then, Father, grant the grace that you promised to bring about that change in your children. These things we ask in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

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