

COMMENTARY ON THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Matthew 7:7-12

We're in the world. And we're for it. But we're not *of* it. We don't march to it's beat. We march to a beat that transcends this city and its culture, this world and its ways. It's a beat from above. It's the beat of Christ's heart. Its rhythm is his timeless wisdom. Its tempo is his time-tested love. And the Sermon on the Mt is the song. In this Sermon, Christ teaches us to live the right way up, in an upside down world. This commentary, written by Terran Williams, draws from some of the best available sources. It will aid in individuals and groups in their study of Christ's teaching in his Manifesto of Life in the Kingdom, Matthew 5-7.

Outline of the Sermon on the Mount

- the life God blesses (5:1-12)
- the call to influence (5:13-16)
- love for the scriptures (5:17-20)
- radical love (5:21-48)
- spirituality before the audience of One (6:1-18)
- pursuing that which is worthy of our lives (6:19-24)
- overcoming anxiety about the future and preoccupation with not-so-important things (6:25-34)
- how *not* to help each other change (7:1-6)
- strong encouragements to pray and love (7:7-12)
- responding to the Sermon's call to radical living (7:13-29)

Matthew 7:7-12 -

STRONG ENCOURAGEMENTS TO PRAY AND LOVE

Prayer and love are emphasised in the Sermon on the Mount.

- 7:7-12 are the last verses in the Sermon on the Mount with commands in them. Jesus covers two main themes: prayer (v7-11) and love (v12). Both of these have already received major attention in the Sermon on the Mount. But Jesus sees it fit to end his message by re-emphasising these two themes of prayer (i.e. right relationship with God) and love (i.e. right relationship with each other).

Ask, Seek, Knock

7 "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives; those who seek find; and to those who knock, the door will be opened.

Ask the Father with perseverance and confidence.

- Prayer has a lot of asking in it. The word "pray" means "ask". Although prayer includes things like worship, thanksgiving and confession, it has asking as a major part. We see this with the words "ask", "seek" and "knock". We have not because we ask not (James 4:2).
- We should pray. Prayer should be a dominant part of our lives. Jesus' encouragement to us to pray echoes the teaching of the rest of the Bible. Call to God and he will answer you (Jeremiah 33:3). People should always pray and not give up (Luke 18:1). Pray constantly (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Devote yourself to prayer (Colossians 4:2). Make your requests known (Philippians 4:6). Pray at all times in the Spirit (Ephesians 6:18). We desperately need the encouragement to pray. Eaton (pg 169) quotes Luther on the spiritual warfare that seems to resist our attempts to getting round to prayer: "Getting ourselves to the

point of praying often causes us distress and anguish. The devil sometimes snatches us from our prayer and makes us so dizzy that we do not even think of praying. By the time you begin praying you have already tortured yourself half to death. Satan is well aware of what prayer achieves and can do. That is why he creates so many obstacles and disturbances, to keep you from getting around to it.” But memorizing and repeating to ourselves these two verses (v7-8) can powerfully help us to withstand the spiritual resistance to getting round to prayer.

- When the answer to prayer doesn't come immediately, we should intensify our prayer. Eaton (pg 167) writes, “Jesus instructs, ‘Ask ... seek ... knock.’ Are they three ways of saying the same thing? I do not think so. When one asks and no answer seems to come, one seeks. When one seeks, and still no answer comes, one gets more desperate and begins to knock on the door more urgently. There is progress here. This is Jesus’ way of telling us to persevere if the answer does not come speedily.”
- Jesus promises that our prayers will result in answers. He gives no less than six promises in these two short verses. By using repetition, he seeks to hammer deep into us that the Father waits for and responds to our prayers. This should cause us to pray with great confidence. Our Father is a father who delights in hearing and responding to our heartfelt and faith-filled prayers.
- Prayer really does change things. Eaton (pg 118) writes, “God has simply ordained that his blessings, which are already lined up for us, come piece at a time as we pray.” Instead of being paralyzed by the mystery of prayer, let us instead start to pray. If we fail to pray, we fail to enjoy all that God has for us. Willard (pg 268,269) writes, “I was raised with a (wrong) theology that presents God as having a great unblinking stare, who never in the smallest respect changes his mind about what he is going to do ... but our requests really do make a difference in what God is and is not going to do.”
- But what should we pray for? By looking at these verses in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, we see that there are at least two kinds of things we should be praying for. In the next points I will explore these.

Ask the Father for the grace to live out the Sermon on the Mount.

- The Christian life is impossible apart from the experience of God’s transforming and empowering grace. God gives what he demands. He enables in us what he expects from us. The Christian is to burn up grace like a Boeing 747 burns up fuel. And prayer is the means of accessing grace. In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ has challenged us to be transformed internally (5:1-12), to profoundly influence and impact society (5:13-16), to obey the Scriptures (5:17-20), to reach high standards of relational harmony, sexual purity, covenant faithfulness, honest speech and unconditional love (5:21-48). He has called us to devote ourselves to spiritual practices such as giving, prayer and spiritual disciplines in a way that pleases him as opposed to a way that impresses people (6:1-18). He has called us to radically orientate our lives around things of eternal value so that we are completely free from worry (6:19-34). He has urged us to help people in a way that is truly helpful, where

we are free from any tendency to condemn (7:1-6). Jesus knows that by this stage we must feel overwhelmed by the sheer challenge of his teaching. We must feel unable to fulfil his teachings. It is at this point that Jesus wisely points us to the source of power that will enable these changes in our lives. He does this by teaching us to pray. We should ask, seek and knock. We should ask God for the power and the change of heart needed to really obey his teachings. He certainly will listen to our prayers of desperation and dependency.

Ask the Father for every imaginable spiritual blessing for yourself and others.

- Whether we ask God or not, we will most likely experience God giving us many good natural gifts – as he does to all people everywhere. This includes oxygen, water, food, clothing, friendship, pleasures, opportunities to learn and grow and work, and so much more. Theologians call these blessings “common grace”. It’s all that God gives to all his creatures, even though they don’t always realize he is the source. Jesus speaks of this in Matthew 5:45. Yet, as Christians we are to acknowledge that God himself is the source of our “daily bread” (6:11). Prayer is not always necessary to receive these “creator gifts” as Stott (pg 187) calls them. But, there is something else that God wants to give. It’s what can be called “redemption gifts”. They come not so much from God the creator, but from God our Father. Stott (pg 187) explains, “God’s redemption gifts are different to his creator gifts. For example, God does not give salvation to all, but only to those who call on the name of the Lord and ask for it (Romans 10:13). The same applies to post-salvation blessings, the ‘good things’ that Jesus says the Father gives to his children. It is not material blessings referred to here, but spiritual blessings – daily forgiveness, deliverance from evil, peace, increase of faith, hope and love, in fact the indwelling work of the Holy Spirit as the comprehensive blessing of God. For these gifts we certainly must pray.”
- I would add to Stott’s list of redemption gifts several more spiritual blessings we can pray for ourselves and others: a closer intimacy with Christ and the Father; a deeper experience of the Spirit’s power; a greater manifestation of spiritual gifts in our ministry; opportunities to meaningfully serve and spiritually impact people; wisdom in decision-making; finances needed to underwrite kingdom ventures; protection from the enemy’s attacks on our health, our church and loved ones; and a greater boldness in sharing our faith with people. And there are many more such things we need to regularly ask God for. We can be confident he will answer our prayers.

9 “Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? 11 If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!

The secret to prayer is to be convinced of the goodness of your Father in heaven.

- This is the second bit of humour in the Sermon on the Mount – the first occurring just verses before (7:3-5). Imagine a boy asking his father for bread and fish, and to his surprise his father gives him a stone and a snake. What a shocking thought! Jesus insists it would never happen. Even though parents are evil, no parent in their right mind would do something that cruel to their child. The parental instinct (Calvin reminds us that God put this instinct there) causes a parent to bless and provide for their young with good gifts. How much more will our heavenly Father, who is perfectly good and wise, be committed to giving us good gifts! Notice that Jesus does not liken the Father's parenting to human parenting – rather he contrasts it. He says in effect: Take the very best human parenting, and then multiply it by infinity to discover his parenting. The secret to prayer is to be convinced of the goodness of our heavenly Father.
- These verses help us understand one reason that God has ordained prayer as a means to our receiving his blessings. In the same way that a parent often waits to be asked by their child for some provision – and likes the feeling of being asked, and of being able to provide, so our Father in heaven waits to be asked by us for certain blessings and provisions. He also likes the feeling of being asked, and of being able to provide.
- These verses also help us understand why our prayers are not always answered. What if a child were to ask for a bad gift, such as a stone or a snake? Perhaps the child thinks this is what he needs. Obviously a good parent, committed to the wellbeing of their child, would not give what is asked. In the same way, it is possible for us to ask the Father for something that we deem to be good for us, but that he – in his superior wisdom – deems to not be good for us ultimately. In this case the Father would decline our request, or would answer but not give us precisely what we requested.
- Interestingly, and not related to the theme of prayer, verse 11 helps us understand what it means that people are “evil”. In the eyes of Jesus, all people are evil. Notice that he excludes himself by saying, “even though *you* are evil”. By calling all people evil he means that all people, having fallen along with Adam, our spiritual forefather, are to some degree morally corrupted. Our motives are not always loving, and nor is our behaviour. We all fall far short of God's holy and perfect goodness. But notice that Jesus is not saying that we are all as bad as we could be. He implies that God's common grace is still at work in people, restraining evil to some degree. This is seen in his claim that, generally speaking, no parent would intentionally harm their child. God has hardwired into people instincts, such as the nurturing, protective parental instinct, that cause us to do good to our children.

12 So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

The most important thing is love.

- Jesus' last command in the Sermon on the Mount is a rule-of-thumb command, also called "the golden rule": we are to treat others in the same way we would like to be treated. Interestingly, this teaching of Jesus' is the most praised by people – but is also the least practised. In it we learn six things about love.
- *Love for each other starts with love from God.* The word "so" can also be translated "therefore". It tells us that the golden rule connects to what has gone before it. But what does it connect to? It connects to at least two things. Firstly, it connects to the entire Sermon on the Mount so far (from 5:3 to 7:11). In this sense it summarizes the whole Sermon on the Mount. It is also the main implication of the entire sermon. Secondly, it connects to the verse immediately preceding it, which speaks of how loving our Father is towards us in giving us good gifts. In other words, Jesus is in effect saying, "In light of the fact that the Father loves you by giving you good gifts, now love each other as you would like to be loved." In other words, our love for each other starts with a revelation of God's love toward us. "We love (each other) because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). We must remember that Jesus is giving this golden rule not to all people everywhere, but specifically to his disciples who have experienced the love of the Father toward them through the sending of his Son.
- *Love applies to every situation and relationship.* Jesus tells us we are to apply the golden rule "in everything". There are 10 000 diverse and often-complicated situations that can be dealt with best by simply applying this "golden rule". We can apply it in every situation and relationship in our lives. We can apply it in husband-wife, parent-child, brother-sister, employer-employee relationships. We can apply it in our treatment of our best friend and a perfect stranger. We are to love all people all the time. That is a major goal of our discipleship.
- *Love is active.* Jesus was not the first person in history to teach the golden rule, but he was the first to say it in the positive. Before Jesus rephrased it, it had only been said in the negative: "Do not do to others what you would not want done to you." Love is more than just restraining ourselves from hurting others. Love is pro-actively doing good to others.
- *Love involves a healthy self-image and self-knowledge.* I know this sounds heretical at first but follow my reasoning. Jesus teaches us that self-concern needs to lead us on to other-concern. Elsewhere Jesus taught, "Love one another as you love yourselves". That one-liner is very similar in meaning to the golden rule. The love of self that Jesus speaks about is not a reference to vanity and selfishness, but rather a healthy self-respect. It refers to a biblical self-image. When we have inflated self-images or low self-images it undermines our ability to love. As image-bearers of God we are valuable. Although we are sinful, we are not worthless. A basic quality of being an image-bearer is a healthy sense of self, of what we enjoy and don't enjoy, of how we like being treated, and how we don't like being treated. For example, as I reflect on how I prefer to be treated, I realize that I enjoy being treated warmly

and respectfully. I don't like it when people are harsh to me, or critical, or dismissive of my perspective. I like it when people listen to what I have to say, and make space for and affirm my unique perspective and contribution. I thrive when people forgive me for my faults, even though they could really rub my nose in my failure if they wanted to. I like it when people make eye contact with me, and apologize when they put me out. I like it when people make an effort to get to know me, and ask me questions about my life. Christ tells us to channel self-concern into other-concern. We should assume that the same treatment from others we appreciate, we should extend to them. In this case I could take my own "list" of preferred treatment, and start to treat people in that way. This is what Jesus teaches us to do. Self-knowledge and a healthy sense of self-respect should lead us to be more loving to others.

- *Love is thoughtful and sensitive.* It takes time to try to see things from the other person's perspective. We stop and imagine how we would feel if we were them. We put ourselves in their shoes. We factor in their unique personality, culture and background. And we treat them like they would like to be treated. Love is other-centred. When in a situation we only factor in how we feel and see things, and no longer factor in how the other person feels and sees things, we act in an unloving way.
- *Love is of supreme value.* When Jesus says "this sums up the Law and the Prophets" he's saying, "The subject of love is the main direction of the entire Old Testament." The fall of humanity in the Garden of Eden led to the break-down and loss of love in all human relationships. But God, through the sending of the Messiah, has been moving the human race towards the restoration of broken relationships and of love.

Reference is made to the following sources throughout this commentary. Each time the author and the page number is mentioned, but not the book title.

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