

# On every side I find thy hand

## A sermon on Matthew 7:7-11

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**M**atthew 7:7-11 is an enthusiastic and exuberant text:  
Ask! Seek! Knock!

The voice is imperative.

These are orders

and there seems indeed to be some urgency about them!

But in each case the proper emphasis lies  
with the second verb, not the first.

Ask and it will be **given**

Seek and you will **find**

Knock and it will be **opened**

The text is formulated as generously as possible.

There simply are no limits, no qualifications!

What will be given and found and opened  
is not limited to the here and now of daily life,  
**nor** to that “great day in the morning.”

What will be given and found and opened

is also not limited to the celebrities or the saintly,  
the rich or the talented among us.

**Everyone** who asks, receives.

**Everyone** who seeks, finds.

**Everyone** who knocks finds that door swinging open.

Any limitation,

any qualification,

any exception

interrupts and contradicts the flow of the text.

The foundation for Jesus’ enthusiasm and exuberance here

is his certainty that God hears the one who prays.

The two illustrations are taken from everyday Jewish life.

Bread and fish are basic foods, everyday sustenance.  
Stones and snakes are also mundane, everyday objects;  
stones and snakes even look a little  
like bread and fish,  
or at least they can appear to be similar.  
But when what is needed and wanted is food,  
something that looks like food  
but does not function as food will not do.

Jesus' illustration here reminds me of those cardboard desserts  
restaurant waiters sometimes show you  
to help you make up your mind about what you want.  
The fake food might help you decide or even tempt you,  
but if it were actually served to you,  
you would soon know the difference!

Jesus' fake food argument is a common Jewish style  
of making a point.  
The stone and snake examples are  
a "how much more" argument  
—in duplicate for a double rhetorical effect.

If even earthly parents know not to give their children fake food,  
**how much more** does God know what we need to thrive.

Jesus' radical trust does not make prayer superfluous but possible.

But Jesus' radical trust in the heavenly Parent  
also raises a dilemma for us.

How do we square all that exuberant faith with our experience?  
For surely we experience life  
as sometimes getting and sometimes not getting,  
sometimes finding and sometimes not finding,  
doors opening and doors shutting!

There is a line in an Isaac Watts hymn that asks,  
*Why do we then indulge our fears, suspicions and complaints?*<sup>1</sup>  
Well, sometimes there are good reasons.  
There is much about life experience  
that obstructs our own certainty  
about the nature of God.

Traditionally, we have a couple of ways of softening this passage to make it fit into our experience better.

We say: Well, not every prayer we pray is answered, at least not in the exact way we expect.

God just gives good gifts, or spiritual gifts.

Nor does God necessarily answer our prayers **when** we ask them.

God does things on God's time, not ours.

Or we say: Well, it must be our fault:

**We** didn't pray fervently enough,

Or long enough,

or with the right words

or the right attitudes—or **something**.

God answers every prayer

if we can only figure out

the right way to pray.

Both these ways of softening the text have truth and are somewhat helpful,

but they also somewhat misrepresent this text.

The "everyone" at the beginning is unequivocal and absolutely inclusive:

**Everyone who prays receives.**

There is, of course, a kind of catch to this text,

as with so many of Jesus' illustrations—

another bit of evidence, perhaps,

that Jesus had a robust sense of humor.

The key to us "getting" this text is to understand

that all this ask, seek, and knock stuff

is not really about getting our own way.

The Jesus who is speaking here was also, after all,

the child who spent his early years as a refugee,

fleeing with his family into Egypt just after he was born,

hustled and hidden until that became a way of life.

The Sermon on the Mount comes early in Matthew

but it comes **after** the pilgrimage in the wilderness

where Jesus looked the very essence of evil in the eye.

It comes **after** the arrest of his cousin John,  
an event that puts Jesus on the run,  
withdrawing into Galilee.

Even then, at the beginning,  
Jesus wasn't getting his own way all that much.  
Even then he had all kinds of reasons  
to indulge fear, suspicion, and complaint,  
to say nothing of later, when things really got hot.

Jesus' certainty that when we ask, we receive,  
when we seek, we find,  
when we knock, it opens,  
is not about avoiding suffering.

But neither is it about getting stones instead of bread,  
although my guess is that  
we often ask for stones instead of bread.

Hans Dieter Betz in his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount  
suggests that the asking/receiving,  
seeking/finding,  
knocking/opening  
that Jesus is talking about  
should be looked at in reference to Job.

We're not talking about success in life;  
we're talking about meaning in life—  
and ultimate meaning at that.

We have, in our contemporary Christian culture,  
reversed faith and seeking.  
Usually when we talk about being seeker-sensitive churches,  
we are trying to be sensitive  
to those who have newly come to faith.  
We seek—and we find—and then we just quit seeking.

What I think Jesus is affirming here  
is an ongoing search for meaning in faith.  
In faith, through faith, by faith ... we ask questions.  
In faith, through faith, by faith,  
we honor the conversation  
between the human and the divine.

We seek—and we find—and we seek ...

It is the journey of Job and his friends—  
not seeking that leads to faith but faith that leads to seeking.

Radical trust is trust in life—  
trust in the life of God and the life God created.  
Our fundamental position in life  
is the posture of the quester,  
the seeker, the knocker on doors.  
For the salty ones of the earth  
it is a lifelong quest.

In radical trust,  
in radical openness to life itself,  
we are pilgrims on the way.

We get a sidewise glance at the profound mystery  
at the heart of Job's relentless questioning of God  
in the Hebrew word *ki-nam*.<sup>2</sup>

It means something like “for nothing” or “just for anyhow.”

It's like when someone gives you a gift—for no reason.  
It's not your birthday; it's not Christmas;  
they don't want a favor in return ...  
it's just “for anyhow.”

Satan's question is: Will Job love God “for nothing”?  
Satan assumes, of course, that Job will not love God  
if God does not help him out of the mess he's in.  
But for all the testy questions Job and God exchange,  
neither one gives up on the other.

At the end of the day,  
the God that Job hears in the whirlwind  
is not only the God that Job loves *ki-nam*  
but the God who loves Job *ki-nam*.

The biblical good news is  
God's passionate desire for relationship with us.  
The biblical good news is  
that God is quite in love with us.  
Not for what we can do for God...  
and not, finally, for what God can do for us ...  
but just because ... for anyhow ... *ki-nam*.

We ask, we seek, we knock ...  
with all the confidence of the child  
who **must** have a glass of water in the night ...  
because God desires us,  
God wants us,  
God loves us.

We receive, we find,  
we walk through the open door into the light.  
And in that light, even if all is not well, all **is** well,  
for God is with us, Emmanuel.

Today we recognize the truth that God has called us  
not because God needs us to set the world right,  
but because God loves us *ki-nam*.

In the words of the old hymn:

*Within Thy circling power I stand;  
On every side I find Thy hand;  
Awake, asleep, at home, abroad,  
I am surrounded still with God.*<sup>3</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>From Isaac Watts, "Now shall my inward joys arise," 1707. In *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, Book 1, Hymn 39.

<sup>2</sup>I am indebted to Perry B. Yoder for this understanding of Job.

<sup>3</sup>From Isaac Watts, "Lord, Thou hast searched and seen me through." In *The Psalms of David*, 1719. Full text at <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/l/t/lthsasmt.htm>.

## About the author

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