

September 24, 2017

The Radical Sayings of Jesus
Ask and You Will Receive
Matthew 7:7-12

Opening words: Today, I continue my sermon series called *The Radical Sayings of Jesus*. You know the truth. Most people read the Bible selectively. There are certain things we have read in the Bible countless times. We read them continuously because they comfort us. However, there are other passages in the Bible we have never read because we find them hard to understand or harsh to our ears. It is true of the entire Bible, including the Gospels. We try to ignore certain words from the Master. The truth be told, there are certain things we wish Jesus had never said. They are just too radical. This is the problem: we can't dismiss those words because they came from Jesus. We must wrestle with them. We must not just understand them, we must apply them to our daily lives. Today's radical saying of Jesus is a fine example. Today, Jesus tells us to ask and we will receive. What did Jesus exactly mean?

This morning we find ourselves in Matthew. The author, Matthew, was one of the twelve disciples. Jewish by birth, he was a tax collector by trade. He experienced the love of Jesus Christ first hand. Matthew wanted to share Jesus's love with others, so he wrote this Gospel about the year 50 AD. The gospel of Matthew is unique. Of the four gospels, Matthew's gospel is the most Jewish. Matthew quotes more Old Testament verses than the other three, and Matthew starts his genealogy of Jesus with Abraham to show that Jesus was descended from the founding father of Judaism. When Jesus uttered this morning's lesson, he was in Galilee. That means his popularity is high. Jesus ascends to a high piece of land, not to escape the crowd, but to be heard by the crowd. We call those words from the high position, the Sermon on the Mount. Our reading for today, Matthew 7:7-12, is part of that teaching. Let me call this message *Ask and You Will Receive*.

Matthew 7:7-12 "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; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

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! 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 great reformer Martin Luther once said, "*To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.*" That is one of my favorite quotes because I have found it to be true. If you find prayer to be an important part of your spiritual life, say, **"Amen!"**

I love this story. Mother Theresa was summoned to the kitchen of the orphanage one day in Calcutta. There was a problem. The head cook was upset because the order of food hadn't been delivered and she was expecting three hundred for lunch in less than an hour. Everyone expected Mother Theresa to contact one of her sponsors for help. She didn't. Instead, she looked at the kitchen staff and said, "I suggest you go to the chapel and pray about this situation". They did, and ten minutes later a stranger showed up at the front door holding a clipboard. He asked for Mother Theresa. When she appeared, the stranger looked at her and said, "The teachers have just gone on strike, so school has been canceled today. I have 7,000 extra lunches. Can you help us use them?" Isn't it great when God answers our prayers with a yes! The problem is, God often answers our prayers requests with a no. If you have ever been frustrated by a "No," say, "**Amen!**"

When I first read this morning's scripture lesson, I could not help but remember my seminary friend, David Glenn. Do you remember David's story? Before he went to seminary, he had the battle of his life. He had a brain tumor. He enrolled in seminary when his doctor said he was tumor-free. Halfway through seminary his brain tumor returned. This time, the malignancy moved quickly. David seemed to grow weaker daily. Soon the doctors said it was only a matter of time. On the Sunday night before he was hospitalized for the last time, we went to a church, where the preacher promised a healing. David had no other options, so he went. He was desperate. The preacher said, if he had enough faith he would be healed. David wasn't healed. A week later, I attended his funeral. I talked to David's twenty-seven-year-old widow, Char. She said David died feeling like a spiritual failure. David believed the preacher; if he had faith then he would be healed. The problem was, he wasn't healed. David forgot the divine truth. Sometimes, God says, "No!"

Do you remember Ted Turner's story? I have told you his story in the past. The cable television mogul is a true American celebrity. He is worth a fortune and seems to lack nothing. However, he lacks any spiritual foundation. He was raised in a strict Christian home, and at one time he even considered being a missionary. That all changed when his sister died, despite his prayers. Turner has been quoted as saying, "the more I strayed from my faith, the better I felt." I have a hard time believing that quote. With all Ted Turner knows, he forgot the divine truth. Sometimes, God says, "No!"

How many people do you know who are mad at God because God said, "No!" They will be glad to tell you their story. With a sincere heart, they prayed. It may have been for a person or a certain situation. They prayed, but their prayer requests seemed to fall on deaf ears. You know it is true because it has happened in your life. How many gravely ill people have you prayed for who have died? How many hopeless situations remained hopeless? How many unemployed people remain unemployed? Have you ever become disenchanted with the faith because your prayers were not answered to your satisfaction? This is the sad divine truth. Sometimes God says, "No!" Ours is not the first generation to experience a divine no.

Consider this: God also said, "No!" to the greatest personalities in the Bible. How do you say, "No!" to Paul? He took the Good News to the Gentile world. He was the greatest missionary of all time. Yet, when Paul prayed that God would heal him from the thorn in his side, the thorn remained. How do you say, "No!" to Jesus? He was the very son of God, who left the perfection of heaven to slum it in this world. You remember the story. Jesus prayed in the garden that this cup could be taken from him, but it remained. Jesus went to the cross and died a horrible death. If God could say, "No" to Paul and Jesus, then God can say, "No!" to us. Life teaches us that God often says, "No!" That is what makes this morning's scripture lesson so difficult to understand. It is almost like Jesus is lying to us. That is why we must look at the scripture lesson and try to understand what Jesus is trying to say. If you are ready to look at the scripture, say, "**Amen!**"

Our scripture reading for today comes from the seventh chapter of Matthew. Let me say this clearly. Verses seven and eight of our scripture reading are not a secret formula to get what you want. Those who see these words in that way are frustrated by these words. The primary point Jesus is trying to make is not about prayer. The primary point that Jesus is trying to make is about the very nature of God. Verses seven and eight were uttered by the Master to explain the depth of God's love for us.

In verses nine through twelve, Jesus uses a loving parent to illustrate this divine point. You know it is true. There are many loving parents in this church, so we understand Jesus's point. We would like to say "Yes" to every request our children present to us but that is impossible. There are many reasons why. Sometimes we say "No" because it is asked out of ignorance. Sometimes we say "No" because our children are short-sighted and we want to spare them from future harm. Sometimes we say "No" because it is uttered in an emotional moment and there is nothing logical about the request. Sometimes we say "No" because the request is grounded in selfishness. When was the last time you said "No" to your children because you love them? Sometime God says "No" because he loves us too. Let me say this clearly. Verses seven and eight of our scripture reading are not a secret formula to get what you want. Verses seven and eight were uttered by the Master to explain to the crowd the depth of God's love. God wants us to come to Him with the desires of our hearts because he wants an open relationship. God loves us. If you are happy that God loves you, say, "**Amen!**" We struggle with this passage because we assume the main topic is prayer, but the main topic is the nature of God. However, that does not mean that prayer isn't important.

Prayer is important to the believer for three reasons. First, God expects us to pray. (Matthew 7:7-8, Luke 18:1, 1 Thess. 5:17.) That is the most important reason to pray. Second, it is in our very nature to pray. It is natural for us to reach to God when our problems are larger than our resources. Third, prayer is the link between us and God. It is upon prayer that God gives us His grace and spirit. The next question is key.

Why does God want us to pray? The answer is not to inform God about a certain situation. God knows all things. The answer is not to change God's mind or alter a particularly sad or hopeless situation. The answer is more fundamental. God wants us to pray to change us. There is no way you can spend time with God and not be changed. Prayer reminds us of who God is and prayer reminds us of who we are! He is the God of the universe. He is the one who created this world out of nothing. He is the one who knows our great dreams and greatest fears. He is the author of history. He is the one who loves you so much he sent Jesus into this world to die so he could spend eternity with you! In prayer, we learn that God is big and we are extremely small. In prayer, we learn Jesus was right! The very nature of God is love. God wants us to pray not to change particularly sad situations, God wants us to pray because prayer changes us.

History tells us Martin Luther, the great reformer, saw prayer as vital. We are told he got up everyday and spent two hours in prayer before he attempted his first earthly task. The night before one particularly busy day, he looked at an associate and said, "I have so much scheduled for tomorrow that I must rise an hour earlier to have an extra hour alone with God." Can I ask you an extremely personal question? How much time do you spend in prayer? If you are serious about growing as a disciple of Jesus Christ, then you must find time to pray. If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**" Did you know John Wesley got up at 4:00 am everyday to spend time with God? How much time do you spend with God? How much has prayer changed you?

I love this story. In the early days of Dallas Theological Seminary there was a critical need of \$10,000 to keep the school open. During a prayer meeting, renowned Bible teacher Harry Ironside, a lecturer at the school, prayed, "Lord, you own the cattle on a thousand hills. Please sell some of those cattle to help us meet this need." Shortly after the prayer meeting, a check for \$10,000 arrived at the school, sent days earlier by a friend who had no idea of the urgent need or of Ironside's prayer. The man simply said the money came from the sale of some of his cattle! I love that story.

Isn't it great when our prayers are answered, "Yes"! The problem is, sometimes God says, "No." However, God always loves us and longs to hear the desires of our hearts. Never forget it. Prayer is important. Prayer may not change every situation, but prayer will change us. How much time do you spend in prayer? How much has prayer changed you? The great reformer Martin Luther said it best. He said, "*To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"