

**“Loving Well”  
Matthew 7:7-12**

While I am certain that Jesus never took a freshmen English class on how to write a paper, the Sermon on the Mount reflects a tight organizational structure with which most of us are familiar. As many of you know the key to any good paper is to *tell people what you are going to tell them*, then *tell them* and finally to *tell them what you just told them*. You will recognize this structure as an 1) introduction, 2) body and 3) conclusion.

Here, Jesus moves into his conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount. And as one of my professors in Seminary said, “Every time you wrap up your sermon, you want to “wrap it up all over.” That was his way of saying that every sermon conclusion should draw all of the details together and drive your main point home.

That is exactly what Jesus does here in 7:7-12. Let’s see what I mean.

Eugene Peterson in his latest installment on spiritual theology, [Eat this Book](#), writes about the dangers of using religious language to avoid the requirements of being a disciple of Jesus Christ. He calls it a “sacrilege upward.” He writes,

[It] takes place when language is inflated into balloons of abstraction or diffused into insubstantiality of lacey gossamer. Pretentious language is as much a violation of the sacred core of language as blasphemy and cant. This happens when we use language to flatter or impress, when we use words to distance ourselves from relationship with others, whether the others are the persons of the Trinity or our parents, leaders, celebrities, friends, and neighbors. If we use language to set others on pedestals or install them in roles, we no longer have to deal with them as persons but only as ideas or representatives or functions. It sounds as if we are honoring them; in fact we are using language to keep them out of the neighborhoods in which we live our ordinary lives. We are then free to deal with them in escapist fantasies, in condescending criticism, in avaricious dreaming, or in curt dismissal.” (Peterson, [Eat This Book](#), pp. 138-9.)

We should not kid ourselves. There is a danger that a seminary can become a cemetery. But this doesn’t just happen to “professional Christians.” All of us are tempted. We are all too familiar with the ways in which we use language to escape the requirement of love. Sometimes we call it manners. When it comes to God, it could sometimes be called theology. Think about the ways in which we use language to keep people at “arms length.” If I can define, classify, explain and justify, then I won’t have to deal with that person or what he asks of me. I can justify my escape, my hate, my condemnation, position, etc. In three words, I can justify my **lack of love**.

It is for this reason that I love the Sermon on the Mount, there is nothing pretentious about Jesus’ words. Here is the God of the universe teaching us about life—how to live in the Kingdom. But one never gets the impression that Jesus is anybody other than someone who is thoroughly a part of this world. There is not an ounce of falseness about Jesus. To be sure, he is insightful. But his insights are those that make everyday life so plain to understand. He makes it so clear what it is that each one of us is called to and about that there cannot remain any doubt. Jesus cuts to the chase; he calls us to love. It is love that he aims to form in us and it love that he talks about.

Verse 12 is clear. Jesus teaches us what we all have known since we were children, *The Golden Rule*.

**Jesus aims to teach us to love well**

If we go back to the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, we will see that Jesus has been interested in **life lived**. Jesus there told us that our righteousness must exceed that of Scribes and Pharisees. They were those who had an external righteousness, for they had committed the sacrilege upward. They cloaked themselves in religiosity, but a religiosity that enabled them to evade the demands of love. Jesus will have none of it.

And perhaps that is something we, as a church community, should reflect on. Jesus will have none of our religious attempts to evade what he calls us to, which is simply love—love for him and love for one another. If you want to know what Jesus requires of us, it is verse 12. He teaches us this truth elsewhere in the Scriptures and there is nothing we can do to run away from its requirement.

I have quoted Dan Allender and Tremper Longmann before, but it is worth hearing from them again.

Love is the measure by which my life [as a Christian] will be assessed. Such a measuring rod strips me of any self-importance. If I am judged on how I love not on how many books I sell, seminars I give, and people I counsel, then at one level it does not really matter if I write, teach, or counsel. It matters only if I love. That seems so stark and unbending. Why can’t I be judged on what I do well and do every day as a natural course of life? Why can’t I be judged on how I run my business or how often I am involved in ministry activity? Most people do not mind being assessed on a wide variety of tests—including how they love—but it does not

seem fair to be assessed on nothing more than the quality of how we have loved others. We want a broader foundation on which to stand. (Dan Allender & Tremper Longman, III)

So, if you want to summarize what Jesus has been teaching us so far in the Sermon on the Mount, it is this—love. The character of the Kingdom disciple, the public practice of Kingdom righteousness and the snares of Kingdom focus have ultimately been all about one thing—Loving Well in the Kingdom of Christ.

So then, if that is what we have done **why does Jesus talk about prayer here in verses 7-12?** What is his purpose for prayer in summarizing his teachings on love?

### **Prayer addresses what stands in the way of our loving well.**

What stands in the way? In a word, it is us. We stand in the way of love. Jesus means to get us out of the way...of love. He does this by highlighting three things

- God the Father is our delight
- God the Father is our sufficiency
- God the Father overflows in love

#### **1) God the Father is our delight (7-8)**

If there is anything that our self-help, education obsessed, pop-psychological world has revealed to us is that we must somehow be the answer. If you have a problem, the answer must be fix-it-yourself. Get educated, get counseled, get explained or get over it. Whatever it is, we must be the answer. We are probably the most self-reliant culture the world has ever seen.

It is no wonder we never pray. Prayer is exact opposite of self-reliance. It is radical God-reliance that is convinced that God is the only answer to what ails our situation. Jesus says in verses 7-8, “pray to God.” Turn to God the father as the one who will delight you. Our conviction about love requires us to turn to the Father alone. **The Christian life is a radical re-orientation from a self-centered reality to a God-centered reality.** We turn from ourselves as the source of our delight to God the Father in Christ Jesus.

He gives three imperatives that express the character of such a prayer;

- **Ask**
- **Seek**
- **Knock**

Each imperative is in the present tense, which teaches us that this is to be the continuous action of the disciple. We are to always be asking, seeking and knocking for the will of the Father to be done in our lives—for God to form love in our lives.

Furthermore, each imperative builds on the one before. First ask, then seek, which could be understood as acting while you're asking. Finally, knock. That is, be persistent. Keep on pursuing what it is that you know God wants to do. He will finally open the doors of love to you.

Why is it that we are so easily discouraged by how long and difficult it is for us to grow in love? Isn't it because such change is long and difficult?

Yet prayer reorients us to the Father so that we can reflect his love. The first lesson of love is to focus on the one from whom love flows.

John Piper writes,

When we humble ourselves like little children and put on no airs of self-sufficiency, but run happily into the joy of our Father's embrace; the glory of his grace is magnified and the longing of our soul is satisfied. ...Prayer pursues God's glory by treating him as the inexhaustible reservoir of hope and help. (Piper, Desiring God, pp. 131; 150)

If we are not focusing on him, how will we ever reflect him?

## 2) God the Father is our Sufficiency (9-11)

But when we turn to the Father, do we turn to him in confidence, with a confidence that he is sufficient to address my concerns? It is to this question of doubt that Jesus turns our attention in verses 9-11. There he reminds us of the sufficiency of the Father. Would the Father give us a lifeless stone for bread, a harmful snake or eel instead of a nourishing fish? Certainly not. When it comes to our heavenly Father, there is no duplicity, harshness or trickery involved.

**God always gives good gifts, exactly what we need at the time.**

Volkswagen commercials advertise "the ego-less automobile." Within each one of us there is a deep sense that we lack, we need something extra, we need to compensate, we need to make up for the past. Wisely, VW has recognized that and is seeking to capitalize on it. But ironically, they are doing the very thing they are accusing others of. In essence the message of the commercial is drive a Volkswagen so that you won't look like all of those other guys who are trying to compensate for their weakness. Drive our car to feel better. Compensate with us and it won't look like your compensating.

What is Jesus' answer?

Trust that whatever is happening in your life is a part of God's good gifts to you and is opening up more of God to you. Because God has given us Christ, he is giving us everything we need. He is sufficient.

- God's answers are not without pain/suffering. God disturbs us enough to lead us to see that he is sufficient and not the trivial and artificial things that we turn to—wealth, status, clothes, education and neighborhoods, etc.
- God's answers are not without the requirement to engage life, rather than escape it. Escape is always the easiest way to doubt the sufficiency of God. Let me run somewhere, anywhere else so that I don't have to deal with life and God. Yet, prayer is the ongoing commitment to God as the all-sufficient one.

## 3) God the Father Overflows in Love (12)

When we know that God is the answer and we know that God is all-sufficient for us, what happens? His love, which we have begun to experience, overflows to those around us. All of a sudden we begin to forget ourselves.

**Rather than trying to manage my life so as to worry about someone else, I begin to trust that God is managing my life sufficiently to enable me to care for someone else.**

His care, his concern, his growing, his mercies are pushing me outward to love the people around me. All of a sudden, I become a fountain of love. Not because I have mastered some new ministry strategy or the house is less cluttered or I am making more money or because I have less to do. Rather it is because I have seen in God, my Father, the satisfaction of my concerns and his care has relieved me of my anxiety so that I can care for others.

What does all of this mean? It means that a congregation that loves well will be a congregation that prays honestly and constantly. It means that we will be a vibrant and dependent church community because we are so deeply enamored with our heavenly Father.

What is Jesus doing folks? He aims to bring us to Father so that we would see in him all that we need.

What is my job as your pastor? I aim to bring you to Jesus so that he will bring you to the Father so that you would see in him all that you need!

Come to him!