

Matthew 7:7-11

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[0 : 0 0] Now, let's turn to the passage that we read in Matthew's Gospel and chapter 7. I want to think a little bit about these verses that we've read twice now, where Jesus brings a teaching on the matter of prayer to His disciples. And as we consider these verses, we want to do so very much in the context of what we're about this morning at the close of the sermon, when there will be the sacrament of baptism, when Jessica and Callum will be baptized, and very much with that in mind, that to, in a sense, inform the manner in which we deal with this passage this morning. Some of you may have picked up on a question that was posed to David Cameron at Prime Minister's Question Time just in this past week. One of the MPs was asking the

Prime Minister, encouraging the Prime Minister to participate in a global day of prayer that is being organized. I really don't know all the ins and outs or the details of it, but he was invited to respond to that invitation. Now, David Cameron, and he is very adept at this, body swerved that question with great political skill and avoided giving any answer to the invitation that he was presented with.

And it would appear from the manner of his response or non-response is that the Prime Minister was clearly unwilling to identify with something quite as embarrassing as prayer, not the kind of thing you want to be associated with as a serious politician in the UK. Curiously, Boris Johnson saw things differently and was happy to participate. Now, what that proves, I'm not altogether sure, but let's not go down that road this morning. But what should we make of prayer? Is it a reasonable thing to do? Does it work?

What do you think? This morning we will witness the sacrament of baptism, in which parents will take vows as they present a child for baptism. And one of the vows concerns the commitment to bring up the child in the faith and involves, among other things, a promise to pray with and for the child.

What then do we make of prayer? Jesus prayed, and he also said some length on the subject of prayer. And this morning I want us to consider one such occasion recorded for us in the passage that we have read in Matthew's gospel. In these verses, in Matthew chapter 7 and verses 7 to 11, Jesus' concern is to get across loud and clear one big message. And the big message that he wants to get across, the big truth that he wants to impress upon his hearers, is that prayer works, that prayer is effective, or perhaps more accurately, that God answers prayer. This is the big truth. He wants people, his hearers in particular, to be very clear on. God answers prayer. Maybe communicators and preachers today would do well to learn from Jesus in getting across one important thing. Sometimes maybe we try and get so much in that nothing is understood. But Jesus here very simply and very clearly wants to get across this big, important message, God answers prayer. It is the main message of these verses, and one we need to hear and assimilate and respond to. But it is also true that in making this main point, Jesus also communicates by the by-the-by, as it were, truths about men and women, and parents in particular, and truths about God that I want us to notice and apply to the duties incumbent on Christian parents in the matter of bringing up our children in the faith, which is very much the theme of this morning.

[4 : 36] So with that in mind, the message I want to divide up in three parts. First of all, simply the argument stated. Here in these verses, an argument is being made. Jesus is arguing in a particular way to make a particular point. So we're just going to notice that very briefly, the argument stated by Jesus.

But then we're going to consider the truths assumed. We're going to notice that in making this argument, Jesus assumes certain things to be true. He takes them as a given that they are true. Now, not all would share Jesus' convictions about these truths, but let's leave that to one side for the moment.

Jesus assumes certain things to be true. We're going to consider what those things are. And then finally, we have the challenge extended. The challenge is extended to you and to me in this matter of prayer. So the argument stated, the truth's assumed and the challenge extended.

First of all, the argument is stated by Jesus. It is a simple argument employing simple and easy to follow logic. It involves arguing from the lesser to the greater in the following formula, if you wish.

The formula is as follows. If A is true, then how much more is B true? If A is true, how much more is B true? Well, what is A? Well, A is here before us, and it is the universally observed phenomenon that parents generally will respond favorably to a request from their children for something that they need.

[6 : 24] Verse 11, if you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children. This is the first statement that Jesus makes. Parents generally give good gifts to their children.

You can travel from continent to continent, from culture to culture, from generation to generation, and this is generally true. It's not absolutely true of every single parent. We're very clear on that, but it is generally an observably true affirmation that Jesus makes. Parents do this good thing.

They give good gifts to their children. And Jesus says that they do this good thing despite the fact that they are evil. Now, that is quite shocking language that Jesus uses, and we are going to come back to that in a moment, but we'll leave it for the moment until we come back to it.

If A is true, how much more is B true? A is this universally observed statement recognition that parents give good gifts to their children. Well, what is B in this argument, in this formula? Well, we simply need to look in the passage for the how much more, and what follows the how much more?

Well, there we have it in verse 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?

[7 : 57] If parents who are not good give good things to their kids, then it stands to reason that God, who is good, will also do so in far greater measure. It's a simple enough argument, and we don't need to bang on about it or dwell on it more. It is there for all to see and to understand.

So, that's the argument stated. But in the midst of this simple argument, there are a number of truths that are assumed by Jesus. The argument is a simple one, but it depends for its force on a number of assumptions. And these assumptions are truths that Jesus clearly considered to be self-evident, and it would seem His hearers also shared this opinion. And the truths in question concern man, and we could think and apply them particularly to parents, and the argument it is parents that are referred to, though the truth goes beyond parents. Truths concerning man, mankind, men and women, parents, and also truths about God that Jesus simply assumes, takes as a given that they are true, and they need to be true in order for the argument to work. Well, let's think about these truths that Jesus assumes. First of all, truths about man, about men and women, and particularly about parents.

The first truth that Jesus assumes is a rather shocking one for us, and we, I think, recoil a little at the language that Jesus uses. We've already noted it in verse 11. If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, and so on. Jesus there, in the passing, very matter-of-factly, makes this quite bold declaration. He says, men and women are evil. It's interesting how Jesus introduces this rather brutal fact, at least to our sensitive ears. He introduces it in such a matter-of-fact manner.

And Jesus here is not engaged in some philosophical discourse. He is addressing His own disciples, and He states directly to them, if you then, though you are evil. He's not speaking in generalities and saying, oh, men are evil, and there are very, there are evil men out there. No, He addresses His own disciples, and He says, look, if you, though you are evil, give good gifts to your children. He just takes it as a given that this will be a truth that they recognize as reasonable and as valid. It would appear that the disciples, His hearers, concur with His assessment. At least no howls of protest are recorded. Now, let's fast forward a couple of thousand years and imagine a similar statement being made today in 21st century sophisticated civilized Scotland. Imagine a Radio Scotland phone-in to discuss the recent UNICEF report about family life. Some of you may have picked up in the news, in the newspapers, this UNICEF report about family life in Europe and some of the comments that it makes, none too flattering, about family life in the UK in particular. We'll come back to that in a moment, but just to give it the context of what I'm constructing here. Imagine you have this phone-in to discuss this report, and one caller begins his contribution by suggesting that one truth we need to bear in mind in considering this matter of parenting and of family life, one truth we need to bear in mind and come to grips with is that parents are evil. Imagine somebody saying that.

I can just hear poor Kay Adams spluttering in her coffee and quickly voicing her displeasure at such an intemperate outburst and swiftly moving on to a more reasonable caller. How can you say that?

[12:19] How could anybody suggest such a thing? It's such an unhelpful contribution to suggest such a thing, the very thing that Jesus takes as a given. He takes it as widely recognized and accepted.

Well, how are we to understand this affirmation of Jesus, this truth that Jesus simply assumes as being accepted by all, that men and women, parents, are evil? Well, the explanation is not that difficult to identify. Jesus knows the moral condition of men and women, of you and me. He knows that we are all fallen creatures. He knows that even the best of folks are sinners at best. We have all inherited the guilt and corruption of our first father, Adam. Now, this may not be a popular message, but it is no less true for its unpopularity. And as parents, as we think of how this truth applies to parenting, as parents, we should recognize this truth and not imagine or pretend that in the care of our children, we are a model of selflessness. Because we are not. Those of us who have been parents for longer recognize without any difficulty that we are far from being selfless in our relationship with our children. We are selfish. We don't bring them up as we ought. We think of our own concerns often above theirs. We have to constantly fight against our ingrained selfishness as men and women, our deep-seated pride and how that pride distorts the decisions that we take and the attitudes that we adopt, our lack of patience, our lack of sensitivity, and we could go on and on. We are selfish. Three in the morning, the baby starts crying. Do you say, yes, I want to help? No, you pretend you're asleep and you get the other one to do it. We do that. We are selfish. Like, let's just get real here. This romantic idea that, oh, I would do anything for my child, it's rubbish. We wouldn't do anything for our child.

Selfishness is ingrained in our nature. And people can say, oh, you miserable Calvinist Presbyterians, what a low view you have of man. No, this is simply realism. This is the way it is. This is what Jesus believed. Indeed, it would seem those who listened to Him had no difficulty with His diagnosis.

Maybe the language, you know, language evolves, and maybe the word evil is one that, of course, in our parlance is reserved for monsters of one kind or another. What Jesus is saying is that men and women are fallen. We're sinners. We're selfish. We have a natural bent towards what is wrong and to looking for our own interests and not the interests of others. We need to recognize that. And as we recognize it, fight against it as we would engage in this privilege and responsibility of bringing up our children. And of course, if you'll allow me just very much in the passing to make the point that this truth concerning the nature of men and women applies to our children also. Our children, too, are fallen creatures with a natural tendency to do that which is wrong. Just to illustrate that, again, for those who are maybe horrified at such a terrible thing to say, it is observably the case that a child does not need to be taught to be selfish. You don't need to teach a child to be selfish. That comes naturally. But you do need to teach a child, to train a child to be selfless. You must intentionally train your child to do what is good. You must deliberately direct and lead your child in the right way. In the absence of that, the natural tendency will be to do that which is wrong and to go in the wrong way. This is one truth about man, about parents, about children, about men and women, that Jesus assumes in this argument that He has presented concerning prayer. Men are flawed. Men are evil. Men are sinners. But there's another truth that He assumes about men and women in the argument that He presents, and it is this, that men, though evil, are capable of good. That is precisely, explicitly what He says.

If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children. In this passage, Jesus recognizes that we do know how to do good things. We do give good gifts to our children.

[17 : 29] It's interesting to compare this statement with the UNICEF report that I just commented on in the passing a moment ago. In that report, the conclusion, certainly the headline conclusion, I haven't gone beyond the headline conclusions, but the headline conclusion was that British parents substitute spending time with their children with material gifts. This was certainly the headline that was very much being bandied about this week. Now, as we compare that with what Jesus says, there is a sobering difference because Jesus very carefully makes it clear that the gifts to be given, this good thing that parents do in giving gifts to their children, the gifts to be given are to be good gifts. You know how to give good gifts to your children? Not just stuff, but good gifts, gifts that are beneficial to your children. Be that healthy food. That's what the child is asking for in this scenario that Jesus is painting here for the purposes of His argument. If they ask for food, we give them food, and we try to give them good, healthy food. We give them clothing. We give them our time, our attention. We are capable of giving good gifts to our children, and Jesus recognizes that. He takes it as a given that that is what parents do, that though we are flawed and though we are selfish in many ways, nonetheless, despite that, we are capable of doing good things for our children and giving good gifts to our children.

And I would certainly encourage parents to do just that, to do that which Jesus says you are more than capable of capable of doing, and indeed you are predisposed to do, to give good gifts to your children. And to do this, to give good gifts, you need to think a little and ask probing questions about the gifts that you do give. Are they good? Are they beneficial? Are they edifying? Will they do good for your child? Or will they perhaps do him or her harm? Well, these are truths about men and women that Jesus assumes in this argument, but Jesus also, more briefly, assumes certain truths about God.

Two in particular that I want to just comment. First of all, Jesus assumes as a self-evident truth, and I recognize that for many in our generation this would not be considered self-evident, but Jesus takes it as a given, as self-evident, that God is good. This is the force of the contrast with evil men. The whole argument rests on this, that you, being evil, are able to do good things. How much more God, who is good, will do much greater things for those who ask Him? Jesus takes it as a given. He assumes that God is good. If God is not good, then the argument Jesus employs carries no weight at all. But thank God, God is good. Remember the words of the psalmist, praise God for He is good.

His love endures forever. Words that are repeated time and time again in the Psalter. And if perhaps you this morning are not persuaded that God is good, and if that is the case, then it's good to be honest about that. Perhaps you're not persuaded. Then I am not going to attempt to persuade you this morning.

Perhaps there would be other occasions where that could be done, or the attempt could be made. But what I would leave with you is other words of that same psalmist who declares that God is good, that you might want to just ponder on. In Psalm 34 and in verse 8, the psalmist extends an invitation, and it's directed to you also. Come, taste and see. The Lord is good, who trusts in Him is blessed.

[21 : 30] If you are not persuaded that God is good, perhaps what you need to do is taste and see and discover for yourself that He is indeed good. He is a good God, a righteous God. He is holly pure. He is unwaveringly just. God is altogether good. Jesus takes this as a self-evident, given truth that He assumes in this argument. He also assumes in relation to God that God is our Father. Jesus is speaking to the disciples and identifies God as their Father in heaven, and so it is. God is the Father of all who, like the disciples, trust in and follow Jesus. He is our heavenly Father. And of course, as a good Father, He deals graciously and generously with His children, very particularly in the matter of hearing and responding to our cries for help. That is, Jesus' particular concern in these verses.

The argument stated, a simple argument, the truths that are assumed upon which the argument is constructed. But then finally, we have in these verses a challenge extended. And what is the challenge?

Well, it's a simple challenge. It's to pray. Jesus is challenging His disciples. He's inviting His disciples. He's commanding His disciples. He's saying, pray to your Father in heaven. Ask, knock, seek, pray.

He is challenging us to come to God with our requests, expecting a willing response. In this regard, John Calvin puts it helpfully as he comments on these very verses, nothing is better adapted to excite us to prayer than a full conviction that we shall be heard.

And the language that Jesus uses, the language that Jesus employs in verses 7 and 8 is so insistent and assured, ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you.

[23 : 46] And then to emphasize there is simply a repetition of the same truths in other words or in a different order. For everyone who asks, receives. He who seeks, finds. And to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

And so the challenge and the invitation is to persistent prayer. All of the verbs that Jesus employs here are in the present tense, carrying the idea of a continuous activity, continuously, persistently, perseveringly. Come to God and make your requests main.

The challenge to persistent prayer and of course to expectant prayer. That we don't simply pray because somehow it makes us feel warm inside. Some kind of placebo psychological effect and we feel better, but of course nothing's actually happening. No, God hears and God answers.

And of course it is implied in this challenge, it is assumed that we will be careful to ask for that which is good. Something our very own children do, not always. But they ask for good things, and when they ask for good things, well, we seek to respond to that request. So we too, as we approach our Heavenly Father, we are to ask for good things. What good things? As we draw things to a close.

Let me suggest in the context of the baptism that there will be this morning, in the context of parenting responsibilities, I would especially challenge parents to ask boldly of God and pray persistently to God on behalf of your children. Ask for good things. Ask for good things. Ask for their health. Ask for their safety. Ask that they would be given wisdom to live in this complicated world in which we live. Ask that they would be given good friends that would be a blessing to them and would help them to go in the direction that they should go. Ask that God would grant to them developing spiritual life and growth. Ask that God would forgive their sins. I still remember, and it's very vividly in my mind, one of the deacons in the church in Moyabamba where we had the privilege of serving a few years ago. And this deacon would sometimes lead the services. And as part of the responsibility in leading a service, he would engage in prayer and a recurring theme as he prayed. And he prayed with such intensity and with such sincerity that it was very impacting. He would pray for many things, but one of the things he would often pray for is he would say, Lord God, forgive our children's sins.

[26 : 36] And I can't give you all his personal background to maybe illustrate even more powerfully how meaningful that prayer was. But the point is that he asked for good things of God. He said, maybe my children aren't asking for it. Well, I'll ask on their behalf. He asked good things of God.

And it is the case in the example I'm citing that God in His grace brought two of His sons, older sons, subsequent to these constant, persistent prayers to faith in Jesus Christ. Indeed, one of them at the end of this year is finishing his seminary studies at the Lima Evangelical Seminary.

Pray good things for your children. Ask good things of God. And your Father in heaven, who is good, who is altogether good, will give good gifts to those who ask Him.

Will you, will I, will you rise to this challenge that Jesus extends to you? It would seem so foolish not to do so. Ask, and it will be given you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives. He who seeks finds. And to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? 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? Let us pray.