

Good Gifts, Good Father

Sometimes the choices we have to make in life are really hard ones. They're not the choice between working in a swamp that's filled with mosquitoes and relaxing on a beautiful sandy beach in some tropical resort. They're harder than that, because it's not obvious to us which one is best.

For example, just a couple of generations ago, people would think nothing of going to work in a logging camp or at a mine for several months - time away from their family - because those were the only jobs available. Now, it's more likely that we'll choose not to go away for an extended period, but we might choose to take on work for the weekends, on holidays - time that we are still away from our family - but we don't think it's going to last, and we know our family could use the extra cash. Those kinds of choices are hard to make because they represent good values, real benefits, on both sides. It's good to provide for the needs of our family and it's good to spend time building those relationships with our spouse and our children. But which is better?

That's not our topic for today, but it is the kind of question we ask over and over when we face decisions that affect the important things in life. For many of those questions we will have differences of opinion and, because our circumstances are different, we will often reach different conclusions. My point is not to say what choices we should be making in a whole bunch of important areas of decision-making; it's just to say that they're important, not just for this life, but for eternity.

Let's look at today's passage and ask, as we read, what kinds of choices is Jesus talking about:

Keep on asking and you will be given what you ask for. Keep on looking, and you will find. Keep on knocking and the door will be opened. For everyone who asks receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And the door is opened to everyone who knocks. You parents - if your children ask for a loaf of bread, do you give them a stone instead? Of if they ask for a fish, do you give them a snake? Of course not! If you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask Him. Do for others what you would like them to do for you. This is a summary of all that is taught in the law and the prophets.

You can enter God's Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose the easy way. But the gateway to life is small, and the road is narrow and only a few ever find it.

(Matthew 7:7-14)

What choices is Jesus offering us here? Can we ask for anything we want, or does it need to be something that God wants as well? There's nothing in this passage, or in the parallel passage in Luke's gospel, that suggests that Jesus was talking about asking for wealth or power. There's no reason to think He was talking about asking for God to give us an opportunity to insult an enemy or embarrass the person who had been promoted ahead of us. What we are to ask for, and what the Father wants to give

us, is “good gifts” - in Luke’s version Jesus says simply, “how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him.” (11:13)

The best way to understand what Jesus is saying in this teaching is to understand the nature of the Father and the nature of the Father’s Kingdom that He has been teaching about all through the Sermon on the Mount. This teaching about asking and receiving, seeking and finding, does not show up out of nowhere, but is rooted in the character of God. It’s His nature to be generous and it’s in His nature to grant us the things we need to live well.

In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus teaches us to pray, “Give us today our daily bread”, meaning, “Lord, we’re looking to You for the things we need.” “Daily bread” should not include a Rolls Royce or a winning lottery ticket - those things are not always good for us. But food and shelter, friends and the prayers of the saints, an opportunity to serve and something to give to others - those are good things. And your Father knows what those things can mean for you and He will give them to you if you ask.

At the heart of Jesus’ message is this concept that God is a good Father - not just the powerful Creator, not just the wise Judge, not just the ruler of His Kingdom - He’s all of those things, of course - but Jesus portrays Him again and again and again as Father, His Father, a good, good Father. And what He teaches us to ask for are the kinds of gifts that a good father would give to his children.

Let’s look back over the Sermon and see what Jesus has been saying about His Father throughout. In the Beatitudes He said that being “in sync” with His Father’s Kingdom was worth any and every sacrifice. You’re in sync if you’re grieving for the things that grieve God and you’re in sync if you are persecuted because you live for God.

Then Jesus told those “in sync” people that they are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. They are people with a mission from God and for God. And because they are in sync with God’s Kingdom and share the values of His Kingdom, they value God’s laws - they obey them and teach others to do the same. But they go deeper, to the spirit of the law, and because they want to be close to the heart of God, they forgive those who hurt them, they make peace with their enemies, they resist lustful thoughts and honour their marriage vows. They will even pray for their enemies and hope that God will answer their prayers with blessing on those who have hurt them.

Their spiritual lives are so given to God that they don’t give to the needy or pray or fast in any way that could be noticed by others, but only so that God will know. Their heart longs for God’s Kingdom to come and His will to be done, and so they seek that for their own lives, especially being careful to forgive all those who have wronged them - just so they can be like God and receive His forgiveness.

Their hearts are set on eternal things - things that don’t get old and wear out, but which are kept by God for them in heaven. Because that’s where their treasures are, they don’t get overly anxious about the relatively minor concerns we have here on earth.

They are convinced that they can trust God with all the big picture issues of life and that He loves them and will care for them.

They don't even get caught up in judging other people for their failures, but humbly recognize that they have their own issues to work on and that their own issues are more than enough.

It's these people that Jesus is now addressing and telling them to ask and keep on asking, to seek and keep on seeking, to knock and to keep on knocking. These aren't the people whose hearts are set on material things, but on storing up treasures in heaven. These aren't the people who are envious of everyone who is more popular, more powerful or more wealthy than they are; they don't care about these things because their Father gives them their daily bread - everything they need.

And, as much as this passage is about the character of the person who is 'in sync' with the Kingdom of the Father, it is also about the character of the Father Himself. What jumps out at you about the nature of your heavenly Father when you read this passage? I think that there are at least these three important revelations about the nature of God:

1. He is generous to everyone who approaches Him. Notice that Jesus says that "everyone who asks receives, everyone who seeks, finds, and the door is opened to everyone who knocks." God isn't just rewarding a few people who are practically perfect in every way - He wants to bless and reward everyone who asks Him.
2. The second thing to note is that He, and the gifts He gives, are always good. Jesus says that we sinful humans know how to give our children good things, and how much more will God give good gifts to those who ask.
3. The third we could probably take for granted, but I want to highlight it because I think it helps us to really take notice of this one: God sees Himself as our Father. We may see Him primarily as Lord or King or Saviour or God or Creator - He relates to us as Father. And He is able to outdo our human abilities at parenting, the Good Father.

For the last few weeks I've been praying the Lord's Prayer as part of my personal devotions and I've found that the most impacting part of praying that way is to start my prayers with the words, "My Father" or "Dear Father". It changes the way I pray through the rest of the items that make up the Lord's Prayer. "Dear Father, I hallow, I honour, I bow before Your holy name." I encourage you to pray that way in your own prayer time, seeking to make yourself, and your needs, open to a Father who knows you and loves you and wants to supply your needs.

Another thing that helps me, and maybe will help you as well, is to learn and to sing to yourself this chorus from the song, "Who You Say I Am":

*Who the Son sets free, oh, is free indeed
I'm a child of God, yes, I am
In my Father's house, there's a place for me
I'm a child of God, yes I am*

All of us have distorted views of our heavenly Father. We have an imperfect understanding of God as Father because our own fathers were imperfect. We have a hard time grasping how deeply God loves us because we don't love that intensely, that sacrificially - ourselves, or we didn't experience that from our father. We may not have any grid, through mere human experiences, for a deep awareness of how a truly good, good father operates. We know it only from Scripture and from the experience of the Spirit as He speaks to us and ministers to our deep needs.

In fact, what we read in this passage is Jesus saying that we are evil, that we are sinful, and that despite that fact, we still know how to give good gifts to our children. When our children are hungry, we give them food - good, nutritious, sustaining food. How much more will our loving Father do good for us? How much more will our truly good Father, who loves us with this generous, gracious love, give us all we need to do well in our lives?

We may not think of ourselves as being evil, but, if we compare ourselves to God, that's where we'll end up. Jesus tells us as much in these verses:

If you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask Him.

So, that's the catch - please take notice of it. Jesus says that we need to be people who ask for the things we need. Earlier, in the Lord's Prayer, He said that we should ask for our daily bread, that we should ask for forgiveness and that we should ask to be led away from the deceptions of the evil one. Here He tells us that the Father will give good gifts to those who ask Him. And earlier in today's passage He says that everyone who asks receives - that that's how generous God's heart is.

The next section of this sermon is one verse long - and it's often referred to as "The Golden Rule":

Do for others what you would like them to do for you. This is a summary of all that is taught in the law and the prophets.

We all know what we want for ourselves. And, if we're able to be honest about it, we know, or we try to know, the people who can help us get it. Here, Jesus says, "Knowing what you would like for yourself, do that for others - make sure they get the thing you consider a blessing." In other words, instead of looking for the people who can help you get what you want be the person that helps others get what they value, what blesses them. It's the opposite of selfishness, this desire to bless, and it comes from the Father's generous heart, just like everything else in this section. Because God's heart is so big, so forgiving, so wanting to bless, we who love Him will become more and more like Him as time goes on and as we seek to know His heart. As He draws us to Himself, He gives us this desire to bless people, to lift them up, to help them get to a better place in life, a place closer to His purposes for them. "Do for others what you would like them to do for you." If you do that, you don't need to worry about studying the law and the prophets, because you'll already be fulfilling all of their requirements.

The section ends with a teaching that covers all that Jesus has been saying. It talks about two roads and the choice we make between them. One is a highway - and it needs to be a big wide road because so many people are on it. It is easily the choice of the majority and so you might think it's the safest. The other road is narrow and the gate at the end of it seems too small to let many in through it. Maybe it would be better to go on the wide road with the big gates because there doesn't seem to be any major obstacle to getting through those gates to the other side.

You Google some friends who are down the road ahead of you. The ones who have chosen the narrow road tell you it's hard. They seem to be facing a lot of challenges. The ones on the wider route tell you it's easy, you can't get lost, everything's right there in front of you. Which do you choose? Do you know what's on the other side of those gates? Jesus tells us what's on the other side. On the other side of the wide gate is destruction and on the other side of the narrow gate is life. And Jesus says very clearly what He would like us to choose: "Enter through the narrow gate."

In the context of the whole Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has just turned the corner. He has given all this amazing teaching about the nature of the Kingdom and the people who belong to it, but now He's getting down to application. He's asking us, not to just admire the Sermon, to make notes about it, to feel like it's really touched us somehow, but to do something about it, to obey it, to make it ours. The things Jesus has been teaching about in Matthew 5 and 6 and now into chapter 7 represent a narrow road with a narrow gate at the end. This road is more difficult to find and more difficult to follow than the road that most of the world around us is travelling on. We must choose it, not just once, but daily.

So, what are some other applications for us as we close this passage on the Father's good gifts?

1. The call to faith begins with the call to believe that there is a God and He is good. Jesus has spoken about the goodness of His Father in various ways throughout the sermon and today's passages are among the strongest words about the goodness of the Father. If we can have the faith that the Father is good, then, out of that, flows the choice to find and follow the narrow road and, on that road, to find the life that God intended for us.
2. The next application is very basic: ask the Father for His good gifts. Don't be shy; don't be overwhelmed with feelings of unworthiness; ask, and it will be given to you, seek and you'll find. The asking is simply exercising your faith, demonstrating that you believe God is good and that He loves you.
3. Finally, let your life count for the benefit of others. That's the Golden Rule and the summary of law and prophets and it's a wonderful way to make a huge difference in this world. Loving people enough to seek their welfare, to do what's best for them, is to bring blessing to the world and to demonstrate, in a visible and practical way, God's great love for us all.