

I want to read a parable written long ago by a Methodist preacher named Hugh Price Hughes, and it goes something like this:

“I arrived in the city of ‘Everywhere’ early one morning. It was cold, and there were flurries of snow on the ground. As I stepped from the train to the platform, I noticed that the baggage man and the porter were warmly attired in heavy coats and gloves, but oddly enough, they wore no shoes. Repressing my impulse to ask the reason for this odd practice, I went to the station and inquired the way to the hotel. My curiosity, however, was increased by my discovery that no one in the station wore any shoes.

Boarding the streetcar, I saw that my fellow travelers were likewise barefoot; and upon arriving at the hotel, I found that the bellhop, the desk clerk, and all the residents were void of shoes. Unable to restrain myself any longer, I asked the manager what this strange practice meant.

“What practice?” he replied. Pointing to his bare feet I asked, “Why don’t you wear shoes in this town?” “Ah”, he said, “that’s just it. Why don’t we?”

“But what’s the matter? Don’t you believe in shoes?”

“Believe in shoes! I should say we do! They are indispensable to the well-being of humanity. Such frostbite, cuts, sores, and suffering those shoes prevent. They are wonderful!”

“Well, then, why don’t you wear them?” I asked.

“Ah” he said thoughtfully, “That’s just it. Why don’t we?”

Although considerably confused, I checked in, secured my room, and went directly to the coffee shop. There, I deliberately sat down by a pleasant-looking, but barefoot gentleman. Friendly enough, he suggested that we look around the city after our meal.

The first thing we noticed upon emerging from the hotel was a huge brick structure of impressive proportions. He pointed to this with pride. “You see that?” he said, “That is one of our outstanding shoe manufacturing establishments!”

“A what?” I asked in amazement. “You mean you make shoes there?”

“Well, not exactly,” said he. “We talk about making shoes there, and believe me, we have one of the most brilliant fellows you have ever heard. He talks most thrillingly and convincingly every week on this great subject of shoes. Just yesterday, he moved the people profoundly with his exposition of the necessity of shoe-wearing. Many broke down and wept. It was really wonderful!”

“But why don’t they wear them?” I said insistently.

“Ah, that’s just it. Why don’t we?”

Just then, as we turned down a side-street, I saw through a cellar window a cobbler actually making a pair of shoes. Excusing myself from my friend, I burst into the little shop and asked the shoemaker how it happened that his shop was not over-run with customers. “Nobody wants my shoes,” he said. “They just talk about them.”

“Give me what pairs you have ready,” I said and I paid him twice the amount he modestly asked. Hurriedly, I returned to my friend and offered them to him, saying, “Here, my friend, one of these pairs will surely fit you. Take them, put them on. They will save you untold suffering.”

“Thank you,” he said with embarrassment, “but you don’t understand. We just don’t do that around here.” But why not, I asked. “Ah, that’s just it,” said the friend. “Why don’t we?”

And coming out of the city of Everywhere, over and over and over that question rang in my ears; “Why don’t we?”

The city of ‘Everywhere’ could be anywhere – anywhere there are people who know the truth, who know what to do, but just don’t seem do it.

We are still working our way through the *Sermon on the Mount* where Jesus has covered a lot of ground when it comes to living in the kingdom of God. He began with matters of the heart – challenging us in regards to our character and our conduct. He talked about being godly influences in an ungodly world. He brought up the convicting topics of murder and anger, adultery and lust, telling the truth and taking oaths, and loving our enemies. Jesus taught on giving and praying and fasting – specifically the attitudes behind them. He explained the connection between our hearts and our treasures. He brought up issues related to our anxieties, and if you recall from last week – Jesus turned His focus to our

relationships with one another where He made a contrast between judging with a critical and condemning attitude and judging with discernment. We learned that judging is not wrong, but judging in the wrong way is.

So, Jesus covered a wide range of various topics in His sermon, but in all of this, there is a common thread that runs through it all – it all seems impossible to do.

“Yes Lord, we know what You’re saying. We know it’s true. We understand it’s the best thing for us. We know what to do, but ah, that’s just it. Why don’t we?”

Now, I believe that Jesus was very aware that what He taught about living in the kingdom would be considered radical and out of reach by His listeners, leading some to question, *“How in the world can I ever live up to what Jesus is calling me to be and commanding me to do?”* Jesus knows this. He realizes the difficulty of the kingdom standards, and therefore, He gives them something else – a promise.

If you have your Bible, let's pick up where we left off from last Sunday. Turn to **Matthew 7**, beginning with **verse 7**. Jesus says,

⁷“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.

I suspect that many of you are familiar with this passage – it’s obviously a passage on prayer – something Jesus has already talked about at length, and at first glance, it seems as though whatever we ask for, whatever we seek, whatever door we knock on, God will give us what we want – and there are people out there who picture God as some kind of *genie* who will give us just about anything if we *name it and claim it*.

Many of you have heard of the *“Prosperity Gospel”* which is popular these days, and I bring this up because this *“Ask, and Seek, and Knock”* passage is often quoted to support this false teaching.

Those who prescribe to this gospel – and it’s not a gospel, say that God wants us as followers of Jesus Christ to be in good physical health and financially wealthy in the here and now, and they say that if you are a Christian and you are not healthy and wealthy – then you aren’t living *your best life* – it’s your fault because you don’t have enough faith, or more likely than not – you are not giving enough to their cause, and of course, when their teaching does not work – well, that’s on you.

Listen, according to the Bible – both Old and New Testaments, physical and material and financial prosperity are not sure signs of God’s favor, and just as true, suffering is not the sure mark of God’s displeasure.

I think of Joseph who went from the pit, to a prison cell, and later to the palace in Egypt. I think of Elizabeth who was barren for most of her life suffering in disgrace until in her old age, she gave birth to John the Baptist, and I think of the Apostle Paul who wrote on this very topic. In **Philippians 4** beginning with **verse 12**. He said,

¹² I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. ¹³ I can do all things through Him who strengthens me. ¹⁴ Nevertheless, you have done well to share with me in my affliction.

We are not guaranteed that we will be healthy and wealthy and free of problems on this side of heaven. In a believer’s life, according to the will of God, there may be times of prosperity, and there may be times of suffering, and through it all, whatever the circumstances, we are encouraged to set our hearts and our minds on Christ who is our strength and our eternal treasure.

Quite frankly, I think the “*Prosperity Gospel*” is something Paul described in his second letter to **Timothy** about the “*tickling of the ears*” – where in the last days, preachers will preach what people want to hear, it’s dangerous – and this passage they quote is taken out of context. So, let’s look at it again and put it into context.

⁷ “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.

Okay, I want to tackle this passage first from the *broader* context and then from the *immediate* context. In the broader context, we need to see this promise in light of the Lord’s entire sermon where Jesus has laid down some kingdom standards of righteousness that are to impact our character, and our conduct, and our attitudes. What Jesus has taught seems impossible, and so He tells us to call upon God for the impossible.

Jesus says, “*Keep on asking, keep on seeking, and keep on knocking.*” That’s the literal Greek translation, and in stacking these words like this, Jesus drives home

His point that we are to passionately persist in prayer, because what He taught cannot be done without it.

Now, on the heels of that, from an immediate context, I think this pertains to our relationships and let me explain. If you recall from last Sunday, Jesus just told His listeners that they should not have critical and condemning attitudes, instead they were to be discerning in their judgments of others. If there is a *splinter* in a brother's eye – if the behavior of a fellow believer needs to be confronted, then after we have taken a good hard look at our own lives – after we have removed the *beam* from our own eyes – then, we can and we should graciously and gently help them. And as for the *dogs* and the *hogs* – those who want to tear apart and trample the precious truths found in God's Word – then we most definitely need discernment in how and when to engage them appropriately.

So, how are we to do this? How are we to help with the splinter in the eye of a brother or a sister without causing more harm than good? How are we to see the beam in our own eyes – a beam we don't want to see? How do we know who the dogs and the hogs are when we meet one? Is there a formula we can follow? Can we get a checklist? Who has this kind of discernment?

Only God does and so Jesus says, “*Keep on asking, keep on seeking, and keep on knocking for it.*” I think we prone to do this when it comes to our own benefit and our own self-interests, but when it comes to our relationships with others, I have to wonder how passionate and persistent in prayer we really are.

Bill Hybels tells about an interesting experience after a baptism service in their church. He writes: “I bumped into a woman in the stairwell who was crying. I thought this was a little odd, since the service was so joyful. I asked her if she was all right. She said, “No, I’m struggling.” She said, “My mom was baptized today. I prayed for her every day for almost 20 years. The reason I’m crying is because I came this close to giving up on her. At the five-year mark I said, “Who needs this? God isn’t listening.” At the ten-year mark I said, “Why am I wasting my breath?” At the 15-year mark I said, “This is absurd.” At the 19-year mark I said, “I’m just a fool.” But I just kept trying, kept praying. Even with weak faith, I kept praying. Then she gave her life to Christ, and she was baptized today. I will never doubt the power of prayer again.”

When it comes to prayer, especially in our relationships, we are to stick with it, we are to keep at it, we are to press on through it, and if the situation worsens, if prayer seems to be an exercise in futility – *don't stop* – instead pray to God all the

more. We are to pray, seeking the things that God wants, surrendering our wills to His will, trusting in His wisdom, His goodness, and His power – and in the process of persistent prayer – through it all, we learn that God is not being *reluctant*, but rather as a good Father, He is nurturing a *relationship* with us, and that’s where it seems that Jesus leads us next.

Beginning with **verse 9**, He says,

⁹ Or what man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he?

¹¹ If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!

As men, none of us are perfect fathers, but even for the most of us, we are usually able to love our children and do good by them, but there is a perfect **Father who is in heaven** – a Father who desires an intimate relationship with us, who loves us and cares for us far more than we could ever imagine, who’s goodness knows no bounds, who knows our needs before we ask, and in His infinite wisdom, He is working on our behalf to give us far better than we could ask. An unknown author expressed it this way:

I asked God for strength that I might achieve; I was made weak, that I might learn humility to obey.

I asked for health, that I might do great things; I was given infirmity that I might do better things.

I asked for riches, that I might be happy; I was given poverty, that I might be wise.

I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men; I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.

I asked for all things that I might enjoy life; I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.

I got nothing I asked for – but everything I hoped for. In spite of myself, my prayers were answered. I am among all men, most richly blessed.

Our heavenly Father asks us to trust Him enough to approach Him. We can have confidence in our Father to do what is right and to do what is good. He may not necessarily give us what we want, but we can trust Him to give us what is best according to His purposes, and His plans, and His timing. That’s His promise.

Now, notice where Jesus goes with this in **verse 12**. He says,

“In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”

This verse is key – it’s a summary verse, and it establishes the immediate context I was just talking about regarding our relationships. Everything from judging others in the right way, to praying for discernment about others, boils down to this one verse that has become known as the “*Golden Rule*”. It’s about our relationships with one another, something the entire Old Testament – **the Law and the Prophets**, summed up with the words “*Love your neighbor as yourself*” or said this way, “*treat people the same way you want them to treat you.*” It’s just another way of saying the same thing.

Do you notice that word “*want*” in the verse? Let me clarify that. How we treat others is not determined by how we *expect* others to treat us. How we treat others is not determined by how we *think* others should treat us. Instead, as Jesus said, we are to treat others by how we *want* others to treat us, and if you think about that for a while, it largely settles the majority of difficulties we tend to have with one another.

So, when it comes to our relationships with one another, this is the standard of the kingdom given to us by Jesus to follow. “*But ah*”, said the barefoot believer, “*that’s just it, why don’t we?*”

Well, let me say a couple of things about that. I think Jesus was very deliberate in first talking about our good Father who is in heaven. Our love for one another flows from our Father’s love for us. It starts with Him – it has to. When our *vertical* relationship is right with God, our *horizontal* relationships with others will naturally flow from that, and as I have said once before, loving one another is the practical application of loving God. It’s what loving God really looks like in the real world.

Now, I also think that before Jesus shared this “*Golden Rule*” regarding our relationships – once again, He deliberately taught us about our need for persistent prayer. The only way we are able to live in the light of this kingdom standard is to *keep on asking*, to *keep on seeking*, and to *keep on knocking*.

So, we know what Jesus told us. We know it’s true. We understand it’s the best thing for us, and on top of that, it’s the best thing for those who relate to us. We know what to do – we are to treat people like we *want* to be treated – and given what we know, **how can we then remain as barefoot believers without excuse?**

Source Material:

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