

Date: September 15, 2019

Series: *Truth to Model for Our Neighbors*

Title: *Ask, Seek, Knock, Do*

Preacher: Mark Adams

Scripture: Matthew 7:7-12

This morning let's begin with a little inter-congregant discussion. Today you get to talk before I do! Ready? Good. Turn to the person next to you and share the answer to this question: *"What is the best lesson your father ever taught you?"*

Okay let's have a show of hands. How many cited a fatherly lesson having to do with:

- Honesty or integrity?
- The importance of working hard?
- How to handle money?
- Marriage?
- Something to do with driving or basic car repair?

Speaking of that, how many of your dads taught you how to change a tire just in case you get a flat on a dark, lonely road where no one would be around to help you? How many of your dads taught you NEVER to DRIVE on dark, lonely roads where no one would be around to help if you had a flat?

Dads are important teachers aren't they!?

I mention "fatherly lessons" because our text for today is where Jesus taught us to refer to God as *"Abba"* or *"Daddy."* You and I are used to that name for God---there are a lot of hymns and praise songs out there that use it. But in Jesus' day talking to God in that way---well it was unheard of. Doing this would have shocked Jesus' hearers because no Jew would have even THOUGHT of addressing God so intimately. But Jesus did--- and He tells us here we should too. We can talk to God as if he were our daddy. And in our text Jesus highlights two lessons our *"Abba"* -- wants us to learn as His children--lessons that make us better Christians and better neighbors.

Take your Bibles and turn to Matthew 7 and follow along as I read verses 7 through 12. If able, I invite you to stand in respect for God's Word as it's read.

7 - *"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.*

Did you notice the first lesson?

(1) Jesus says that as Abba's children we are to be a PRAYING people.

I'm sure this doesn't come as a shock to you because we hear it all the time. Prayer is basic training for the Christian. We study about it all the time, it's a popular sermon topic for pastors.

And it's an important parenting lesson. In fact, if you were blessed with a good earthly ABBA or MOMMA and they taught you to pray beginning when you were very little, raise your hand. You had great parents! I love hearing Lydia and Joel and even Nathan pray before they go to bed or before they have a meal. Parents SHOULD teach their kids to pray because prayer is central to our relationship with our Abba.

Back in the fall of 1990 when Sue and I were meeting with the search committee about coming on staff here at Redland, we were staying in the Sheraton over by Sam's Club, and Sue said God woke her up. So as not to disturb me, she got up and went into the bathroom where like Samuel she opened her heart to hear our Abba's message. When they finished talking, she came back in the room and woke me up. I asked her, "*What did God say?*" I was expecting some insight into our coming to Redland. But that's not what happened. Sue said, "*God told me to teach our children to pray.*" That's something all parents should do.

My point is: we--Abba's children---must be PRAYING people. Prayer; this two-way conversation with our Heavenly Father is crucial. Can I get an AMEN? Sure prayer is how we get much needed guidance and comfort. It's how we get to know God. It's how we become LIKE our Lord. As Richard Foster puts it, "*In real prayer we begin to think God's thoughts after Him: to desire the things He desires, to love the things He loves. Progressively we are taught to see things from His point of view—To pray is to change. This is a great grace. How good of God to provide a path whereby our lives can be taken over by His love—and joy and peace and patience and kindness---and goodness and faithfulness and self-control.*" Peter Kreeft goes so far as to say: "*Nothing but prayer can make saints because nothing but God can make saints, and we meet God in prayer.*"

Now note HOW Jesus says we should pray. What words does He use for this lesson in prayer?

Right! He says we must, "***ask, seek, and knock.***"

And I want you to note that He stresses the importance of this first "*Abba lesson*" by saying that if we pray in this way, "***we will receive, we will find, we will have doors opened.***" He's saying our prayers will be answered if we pray in this way. But don't misunderstand, He's not saying these three words are magical or something. No, He's simply teaching us that beneficial prayer is characterized by PERSISTANCE.

You see, the Greek is literally translated, "***Keep on asking; Keep on seeking; Keep on knocking---and THEN you will receive, find, and have the doors opened to you.***"

And again, don't misunderstand. This isn't a lesson in the "*name it, claim it*" way of thinking. Jesus is not saying if we persist enough God will eventually give in and grant our three wishes like Aladdin's genie in that lamp.

This week I read about a huge Chicago company that is one of the world's largest magazine fulfillment firms. Of course, they handle subscription mailings by computer. Among other things, the computer sends out renewal and expiration notices through snail mail. Well, one day the company's computer malfunctioned. It sent a rancher in Powder Bluff, Colorado, 9,734 separate snail mailings informing him that his subscription to *National Geographic* had expired and he'd better do something. Well, this got the rancher's attention, not to mention the poor mail carrier who had to deliver all that junk mail. When he saw the pile of letters, the rancher dropped what he was doing and traveled 10 miles to the nearest post office where he sent in money for a renewal along with a note that said, "*I give up! Send me your magazine!*"

Jesus isn't saying we must be like that faulty computer. He isn't saying if we persist enough, if we keep on "rubbing the lamp" asking and seeking and knocking long enough God will reluctantly say, "*I give up! I will*

give you that brand new candy apple red Mustang convertible you've been asking, and seeking, and knocking to get!" No, the lesson here is that prayer must be a constant thing. We must be a **"pray without ceasing"** people. We must persist in talking to God and listening to His responses. To grow to be more like Him--to deepen our relationship with Him--we must keep this constant conversation going.

A maturing Christian learns this lesson because they know that prayer makes a difference. Not just in things, but in us. We learn to persist in prayer because the more we pray the more we learn to pray rightly, the more we learn we can trust God to answer, trust Him to give us whatever we need. And as part of His lesson on prayer, Jesus uses that *"a fortiori"* deal we talked about two weeks back. If you missed that sermon, this is when you say if something little is true then something big is true. Like, *"If you think that frozen lasagna is good---the one you got on sale at Giant---you will love my Italian mother's homemade lasagna!"* But of course, Jesus' is better at *"a fortiori"* comparisons than me. Look at verses 9 and following where He says **"Which of you DADDYS, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you human ABBAS, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your ABBA in Heaven give good gifts to those who ask Him!"**

He is saying, *"You must persist in prayer---it must be your lifestyle---you must have a constant conversation going on with God because He can be trusted to give you what you need. God packs a MUCH better lunch! He's like an earthly ABBA---but so much better!"*

I know I could ask my dad for ANYTHING and if I needed it he would find some way to meet that need. I bet most of you can say the same thing. Well, with God this is EVEN MORE true. Archbishop Richard Trench puts it this way: *"Prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance ... it is laying hold of His highest willingness."* God wants to help us with our needs! He wants to answer our prayers.

Craig Larson shares the following story about the power of persistent prayer: *"Last night a woman in our church told how God had just given her success on a large, important project at work. She is a website architect working for a big downtown bank. She was hired specifically to upgrade their site's interface for those with disabilities and she felt it was God's will for her to make this interface happen. But everyone with whom she directly worked told her: You can't do this. You will fail. You don't have the necessary intelligence for this. And---she agreed. She didn't know how to do it. No one knew how to do what the bank was asking. One technician told her he could not do in a year even part of what the company was asking to be done in six months. These were uncharted waters. She feared what would happen if she failed. That she would lose her job and have to move away. But, she called out to God. All day long, every day, she prayed fervently over every detail, every web page, every line of code. She literally wept and prayed. She felt small and vulnerable, but she also had fierce conviction that God was great enough to help her with this impossible job. She kept crying out to God day after day, planning functionalities, writing code, telling her team of developers what to do. Day after day she received wisdom for one piece of the project after another. Every step and idea was a discovery. Week after week, one piece, one page, one functionality of the website after another came together. Months passed and the progress continued. The hand of God was upon her, and He blessed her entire team. With the deadline approaching they were ready to release their work. They were ready to go live with approximately eighty new web pages of cutting edge technology. On the day of release they discovered one minor problem, just one easily fixed bug. But everything else worked flawlessly."*

All this happened because of one of God's children who knew the importance of persistent prayer. Can you imagine the joy she felt in that prayer-partnership with God? Think of the excitement she experienced as God helped her with every needed step.

You know the greatest impact you can have on your neighborhood is through prayer. The best neighbors are praying neighbors. God teaches--ABBA teaches--His children to be a PRAYING people. Are you that kind of Christian? Do your neighbors KNOW you persist in praying for them?

That leads us to this second lesson from our Abba.

(2) He teaches us to be a DOING people.

We aren't just to be on our knees, we're to get up off them and DO. Look at verse 12 and see specifically WHAT Jesus says we are to do: ***"In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets."***

Of course we know this as what? Right! THE GOLDEN RULE. It has also been referred to as the "Mount Everest of Ethics." And I would agree. This particular "Abba lesson" is the peak of good behavior, of Godly behavior. Jesus said as much. He said, ***"This is the essence of all that is taught in the law and the prophets."***

This week I read about a conversation between the head of the astronomy department at a major university and the dean of the divinity school. The astronomy professor said, *"Now, let's face it. In religion, what it all boils down to very simply is that you should love your neighbor as you love yourself. It's the Golden Rule, right?"* The dean said, *"Yes, I suppose that's true, just as in astronomy it all boils down to one thing—'Twinkle, twinkle, little star.'"* With his jab, the divinity professor was hinting that, our faith as Christians is much more than the golden rule but the way we practice our faith--the way we DO it--does indeed boil down to this statement. Now, people say, *"Isn't the Golden Rule found elsewhere and before Jesus was born?"* And the answer is, *"Yes---and no."* Something that SOUNDS like verse 12 is found elsewhere but it's always in a negative form.

For example:

- Five hundred years before Jesus Confucius said, *"Do not to others what you would not wish done to yourself."*
- In 20B.C. the famous Jewish Rabbi Hillel said, *"What is hateful to you, do not do to anyone else."*
- In the apocryphal book of Tobit, Tobias said, *"Do to no one what you yourself dislike."* (Tobit 4:15)

So yes, a similar form of the golden rule had been around a long time. But did you note the difference? These earlier versions ARE in the negative form. *"Do not do to someone else what you wouldn't want them to do to you."* And you may be thinking, so? Isn't that the same thing? NO. Jesus' version was VERY different--revolutionary in fact. The negative form is just a common sense statement without which no human interaction would be possible. It's just basic good manners. It's easy, requiring no effort, no "DOING." For those who want to get by in life doing the very minimum, the negative form of this commandment is the rule to live by. It does require some thoughtfulness, some consideration, some empathy, but not much.

Here's how the negative form of this commandment is lived out.

One morning you take a walk. It's already hot and humid and as you head down your street you pass the home of an overweight neighbor who is obviously exhausted from attempting to mow his lawn. He is sweating profusely. He's moping his brow. His shirt and shorts are soaked with sweat and he has a lot of lawn yet to mow. Yourself, *"If I was in that situation, I wouldn't want someone to laugh at me and tell me to get in shape--so I won't do that to this person."* You finish your walk and head to work and as you walk through the door of the office you say to yourself, *"My kids are starting school and school supplies are pricey. I could really use some pens and pencils and paper clips and staplers---but, if were my boss, I wouldn't want my employees to*

steal from me, so I won't steal from my employer." At the end of the day you go home and the kids are wired and you are tired and you say to yourself, *"If I were a kid, I wouldn't want my dad to yell at me, so I won't yell at my kids."* You plop down in your easy chair and watch the news while you wait for supper.

If you live this way you will be judged as fairly decent guy. You don't make fun of people, you don't steal, you don't mistreat your children. You're not a detriment to society. But let's face it, when it comes to neighboring--not to mention parenting--you are doing the absolute minimum.

But, for those who want to be Christlike, for those of us who want a dynamic relationship with our ABBA---for those of us who want to experience a truly ABUNDANT life, we embrace a higher standard. You see, we should be known not for the things we DON'T do, but for the things we DO...DO!

Here's how the same scenario would go if you obeyed Jesus' version of this ethical command.

You're walking down the street where you live and you see a neighbor who is overweight struggling to mow their lawn on a hot summer morning and you say to yourself, *"If I were in that situation, what would I want someone to do for me? Why, I'd want someone to offer to help."* So, instead of just not making fun of the guy, you get him a cold drink and guide him to a seat in the shade. You get him a fresh towel to mop his brow and say, *"Neighbor, you sit down---I'll finish your lawn. And tonight why don't you and your family come over for dinner."* After finishing the lawn you hurriedly shower and when you enter the office, and instead of just not stealing, you say to yourself, *"If I were my boss, I would want my employees to do their very best---even when things get a little hectic."* So, you approach your job differently — instead of doing the minimum to get by --- instead of NOT stealing office supplies---you go above and beyond the call of duty. In addition to the work your boss gives---you ask for more work. Your boss loves you. And when you get home in the evening and you're tired from working so hard you say to yourself, *"If I were my child, I would want my Dad to be involved in my life, to play catch with me, or have a pretend tea party, or just listen to what I have to say."*

So, you take off your jacket and loosen your tie and put down your stuff and get down on the floor with your little ones and play---or go out in the yard and toss the ball----or offer to help them with their homework. Then while they clean up for dinner, you set the table. After supper you tell your wife to take a break. You get the kids their baths and put them to bed and do the dishes.

Do you see how revolutionary Jesus' version of this command is? When we obey it---the world is a better place! OUR world is a better place!

In 1999, Kevin Stephan of Lancaster, New York, was a bat boy for his younger brother's little-league baseball team. During one game, a player who was warming up accidentally hit Kevin in the chest with a bat. Kevin fell to the ground, unconscious. His heart stopped beating. Kevin says, *"All I remember, is that, all of a sudden, I got hit in the chest with something, and I turned around and passed out."* Fortunately, a nurse whose son played on the team was able to revive him. Kevin and his family later learned that the nurse, Penny Brown, was supposed to be at work that night but had been given the night off at the last minute. But the story doesn't stop there. Seven years later, in January of 2006, nurse Penny Brown was eating at the Hillview Restaurant in Depew, New York, when she began to choke on her food. Penny said, *"The food wasn't going anywhere, and I totally couldn't breathe. It was very frightening."* Patrons began screaming for someone to help. One of the restaurant employees—a volunteer firefighter—ran out from the back. He wrapped his arms around the victim, applied the Heimlich maneuver, and saved the woman's life. When the emergency was over, the patron and employee recognized each other. The person who saved Penny's life was 17-year-old Kevin Stephan, the same boy whom Penny had saved seven years earlier.

Sometimes doing unto others as we would have them do to us has greater implications than we might think. Doing to others what you would want them to DO to you really can change our world! Now before I let you go, let's apply both of these "ABBA LESSONS" to evangelism---the Great Commission. If we are a PRAYING people, if we spend our lives in constant, persistent conversation with God, like HIS heart---our hearts will break for neighbors who don't know Jesus. If we know a neighbor who is not a Christian, we'll pray for them. We'll look for God-given opportunities to TALK to them about Jesus. We'll do this because it is our Lord's command, but also because it is the best way to obey the Golden Rule. I mean, who WOULDN'T want a friend or neighbor to tell them how they can have their sins forgiven and spend eternity in Heaven?!

As you know a few weeks back Sue and I were in Europe with the Michaels and the Faulconers. We've travelled together before and Hugh is always our travel guide. He is better than PRICELINE and EXPEDIA combined! Well, on this trip one of the places Hugh arranged for us to stay was in the Windermere region of Northern England. It's an area full of lakes and forests and small villages. When we played the Susan Boyle clip last week and she said she was from a place of villages all close together, I thought of Windermere. Windermere where Beatrix Potter lived and wrote her famous children's books about Peter Rabbit and the gang. Hugh made arrangements for us to stay at an inn that overlooks one of those lakes. This is a view of Miller Howe from the lake. It's kind of a famous inn. The queen once stayed there and it's where the best dessert in the world---STICKY PUDDING---was invented.

Sue and I had a balcony in our room and we had amazing views of the lakes, the hills and mountains. Here are a couple shots of the views we had from our balcony. We stayed there three days while we toured the countryside and on the morning of our second day, the owner of the Inn, a wonderful man named George, saw us at breakfast and insisted we have dinner there in the inn that night. He wanted us to experience the mouthwatering food prepared by his award-winning chef. Now here's where the first ABBA lesson comes in. I was looking for a way to decline because the meal cost nearly \$60 a plate, but I felt God saying, "ACCEPT." I think the same thing was happening in everyone else, but we are all praying people so we obeyed God and said, "Sure George! We'd love to." And I'm so glad we did. That night George happily, proudly, served us himself and explained in detail how each part of the meal was prepared; amazing French onion soup, mouth-watering vegetable compost, goat cheese mousse in a balsamic gel, ham hock terrine with baby carrots, a dried aged filet of beef that melted in your mouth and some of that sticky pudding I told you about. It came with vanilla ice cream and caramel topping. By the time we finished it was nearly midnight. We had taken our time enjoying the meal and the conversations with George as he delivered each course. He even brought the chef out to meet us. By then we were the only ones left in the restaurant and as we were about to drag our bulging bellies up to bed, George who seemed tireless got a bottle of champagne and sat down with us. He poured some for all of us and asked each of us to share a little about who we were and what we do. He wanted to hear our stories. I confess I was tired from they day's touring and with my full stomach I was getting very sleepy.

But George insisted and that still small voice from Abba encouraged us to, so we stayed and talked and in that way we learned a lot about George---and he learned that we were Christians---and that I am a pastor. At this point he got more interested and asked questions about our faith. You see, George has an interest in religion. As a child he was raised Catholic and a priest once told him that God didn't love him, that God didn't really love anyone because we are all filthy sinners. He used an expletive I won't, but it was a terrible DEMONIC thing for a priest to say to a child. Our adversary used that evil priest's statement because George used it to rationalize his abandoning the Christian faith and embracing reincarnation. He told us, respectfully, that he doesn't believe in Jesus or the Bible and I think he hoped our conversation would help him rationalize his beliefs.

At this point, I prayed and asked God for help and not only did He help all of us explain our faith as Christian, God energized me. He met our needs in the wee hours of the morning in that Inn. I mean, our fatigue disappeared. And every time it became our turn to share God put the words in our minds as to what we should say. It was so exciting--so abundant! We talked with George for over two hours, until way after 2AM. He didn't change his mind, but he did allow us to pray for him. And he promised to read some books I sent him. I still pray for George whenever God brings him to mind.

Now if we weren't DOING people we might have thought, *"I wouldn't want to be offended---I won't talk about faith with George. I'll thank him for the meal and head to bed."* Right? But because we know our Abba wants us to DO unto people what we would want them to DO unto us because we know how wonderful it is to KNOW God and to experience His forgiveness and grace and how ABUNDANT life is when we join Him in His work, we DID what we DID that night in Windermere.

I imagine many of you PRAY-ERS and DO-ERS out there could share similar stories. I encourage you to do so! But for now if you are thankful that our ABBA taught you these two lessons would you say, *"Thank You Abba!"*

Let's pray.