

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW



Keep Seeking Matthew 7:7-11

As we've worked through the sermon on the mount and the high calling Jesus is making on our lives, one of our responses is probably, "this sounds very hard." This is a hard life to live, a difficult way to follow.

And it's a hard way to live for a number of reasons:

It's hard because of the incredibly high standard.

Matthew 5:48 "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Jesus expects, not perfect obedience, but true obedience where we hear these words and do them, where we build our lives on the rock. This is the Christian way of life that Jesus is describing, not just an ideal standard that we shouldn't try to keep.

We will certainly come up short and need to turn to Jesus again and again for forgiveness. But we only know we need to do that because we're striving to keep the standard He laid out for us here. This life is our aim, and it is a different way to live than we've ever lived before.

It's hard because it's a high standard.

And it's hard because it calls for a radical re-orientation of our lives.

In Matthew 6:33, which we briefly touched on a couple of weeks ago, Jesus says:

Matthew 6:33 [33] But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

And there, he is contrasting this Christian way of life with the way of life of those who don't believe in the Lord, who seek other things first. He said that we are called to have a one first concern: the kingdom of God. That's the goal.

So for a Christian, living for Jesus is a whole-life endeavor. It isn't an add-on in our lives that are still given to seeking other things first. It's a re-orientation of our lives around seeking the kingdom of God.

He's teaching us a number of important virtues in the Sermon on the Mount, but He isn't teaching us to simply add virtues to normal life, or practice normal life with normal pursuits only more ethically.

This sermon re-orientes us on a different pursuit altogether. We are to seek first the kingdom. The word "seek" here is present imperative, which means this is an ongoing quest.

We are to be people whose lives are characterized by an unceasing quest for the kingdom.

So what is the kingdom?

One of the reasons we get confused about what the kingdom of God is is that when we think of kingdom, we think geography - its a place with a border and maybe walls around it and a capital city with a castle and the king who reigns over that kingdom (as in a place.)

But the word **basilea** meant more than a place, it meant a **REIGN or a DOMINION**. For example, when the equivalent word was used in the old testament, scripture would say things like “**in the year of the kingdom of ...**,” meaning in the year of the reign of a given king. *That expression wouldn't make any sense if kingdom only meant a place, it also meant a reign of a person.*

We might use the term "presidency" in a similar way - "During Carter's presidency", "during reagan's presidency", etc. The new testament would have said something like, "During Carter's Kingdom"

So when Jesus says the kingdom is at hand, he is not saying, look around at this place, you are in the kingdom. He is saying, "The reign of God is here."

So the Kingdom is the reign of the king.

So we are to seek, first and foremost, the reign of Jesus over every aspect of our lives. And when we do, we can trust God for the provision of the other necessities.

So we are called to a continuous, active, persevering quest to submit all of our life to the reign of King Jesus. We seek His reign first.

And that doesn't come naturally - we are called to give up what we wanted, and to want something else more.

It seems hard to obey the sermon on the mount because of the perseverance necessary.

Jesus isn't calling for a momentary emotional commitment, but a life of persevering in following Him.

We are called to keep going, to continually pursue His reign over our lives. And that gets hard - we lose the newness and the initial emotion of it all, we struggle with ongoing problems outside of us and sins inside of us. We get disillusioned with the church, with the way our lives are turning out. Others that were walking with us bail out, or maybe even use and mistreat us along the way. It's hard to *keep on seeking*.

The whole Christian life is hard.

It's also hard because of the balance necessary in the Christian life. Last week's passage for example called us not to judge, to be free from a critical spirit, never imposing standards on others we wouldn't want imposed upon ourselves. We aren't to be people who are hypocritical, who make others small, who condemn others. AND we are called to be wise and discerning, to read peoples' response to the message of Christ. Sometimes faithfulness is hard because it feels like walking a tightrope.

We want to be true and discerning and against every form of sin, but gracious and kind and patient and benefit-of-the-doubt giving.

So Jesus has called us to this life of holiness, of total devotion, of perseverance, and of balance between truth and grace. This is a hard life.

And many walk away from it.

There's a movement that some have called deconstruction in our day, some is good: a re-evaluating of what we've always been taught by the Bible and a decluttering of the faith. That's good - to always be reforming like that.

But there's also a widespread rejection of the faith altogether. Many have walked away.

And we might think that's a new thing. But listen to the last written words from the Apostle Paul:

2 Timothy 4:9-18 Do your best to come to me soon. 10 For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. 11 Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry. 12 Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus. 13 When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments. 14 Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. 15 Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message. 16 At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! 17 But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. 18 The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

You can hear in Paul this sense that most of his companions have abandoned, not only him, but the pursuit of Jesus altogether. He was quite alone. And the temptation to quit must have come his way, too.

In Philemon 24, Paul called Demas his fellow worker. But somehow he fell in love with this present world and took off. Alexander came to strongly oppose his message.

His whole band of friends, people who were supposed to stand by him in the hard work of declaring the message of Christ, all deserted him.

I'm sure Paul wanted to give up seeking this kingdom at times.

And we will be tempted in the same way.

So Jesus encourages us in today's passage to keep going, and reminds us of what we need to know to keep going:

Matthew 7:7-11 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 the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. 9 Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? 11 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

So in verse 7, Jesus calls us to persevere in going after God. These verbs could be translated, “Keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking.” He is calling us to persevere in our pursuit of Christ and showing us why we can.

So he says to keep on asking. And that is a call to continue praying. With the promise that God will give.

He says to keep on seeking, which is a call to continue in diligent search and study and effort, with the promise that you will find.

He says to keep on knocking, to stay determined in your pursuit of the kingdom of God. Because if you knock, the door will be opened.

And none of these promises are just hopeful sentiment. He isn't saying, “Good things usually come to those who wait.” These are promises that our Father is actively providing all we need.

Verses 9 and 10:

Matthew 7:9 Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? 11 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

Jesus, in a solid statement on our depravity and original sin, says that we are evil. The best parents among us are sinners to the core.

And none of us, if our kids ask for bread, would instead give him a stone. It's even below the worst parent here to say, "My toddler asked for a dinner roll, so I just gave him a rock that looked like one!"

Jack Handey, who wrote the deep thoughts segments for SNL in the 80s, wrote "One thing kids like is to be tricked. For instance, I was going to take my little nephew to Disneyland, but instead I drove him to an old burned-out warehouse. "Oh, no," I said. "Disneyland burned down." He cried and cried, but I think that deep down, he thought it was a pretty good joke. I started to drive over to the real Disneyland, but it was getting pretty late.

And that's funny because it would just about never happen.

And if your kid asks for a fish to eat (probably a normal part of lunch in Jesus's day,) you're not going to trick them and sneak a cobra into their lunch box.

And here's the thing: you're evil, but you still know how to give good gifts to your kids.

Your Father in heaven is not evil at all. So when we ask for what we need, should we really expect a cruel response from Him? Sometimes we can convince ourselves that He isn't kind, that He loves to watch us wither.

But if we believe what Jesus says here: that He is a generous God who responds to our prayers and our seeking and our persistence, and does so with goodness and generosity, it will make us people who persist in going after Him and who can persevere.

If we believe he is a withholding, stingy, absent, non-responsive God, then we will try to live out the commands in the sermon on the mount out of our own internal resources, and of course we'll quit.

We'll get so sick of our failures, we'll lose the support of our friends, we'll face too much opposition, and, like Demas, we'll fall in love with the more comfortable present world. If we don't see God as a generous Father, we won't persevere.

So let this sink in: God is a generous God.

He came and poured Himself out all the way to the bottom for us. He held nothing back and gave Himself freely to us. He's not a withholding, stingy God, but a pouring out God.

You see it in all three members of the trinity. God gives. Jesus said that was the whole reason He came was to give Himself:

Matthew 20:28 "even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"

So Jesus the Son of God came into this world to serve and to give - to give the most generous and lavish gift imaginable - Himself. Nobody can give much more than his whole self. But there is one gift that seems even bigger than that.

John 3:16 "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

The Father gave his Son. Because of the nature of the trinity, when Jesus died on the cross, God the Son was giving Himself for us, and God The Father was giving His Son for us. And there's nothing more generous than that.

I know that most of the parents in this room would give their own lives before they gave the lives of their kids. To give your child is unfathomable. But God our Father gives.

And to round out our trinitarian picture of a generous God, the Holy Spirit generously gifts His church:

1 Corinthians 12:4-7 "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

The Spirit of God, the third person of the trinity, gives gifts to His church.

God supplies all of our needs by giving Himself, giving His son, and giving us gifts to serve others with. He is not a miser, he is not cheap, he is not stingy, he gives us only the best, He pours himself out and lavishes us with the over-the-top gift of His son, himself, and gifts to serve others with.

And Jesus reminds us of that when He tells us to keep going: to keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking.

He says to keep going after God, because God gives good gifts to those who ask Him. God does respond to our prayers, He does honor our study, He does do things in response to our persistence.

Eventually He opens the doors we're knocking on, so keep knocking.

If we believe that God is a good Father who responds generously, we can keep going after Him and His reign. If we disbelieve it, we won't.

To know the generosity of God changes you. And to doubt it hurts you.

It was doubting God's goodness and generosity that led to mankind's first sin - Adam and Eve sinned because they thought God was keeping something good from them in telling them not to eat from the tree, so they ate.

Genesis 3:1-6 "Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made.

He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You[a] shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" 2 And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, 3 but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" 4 But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. 5 For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." 6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise,[b] she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.

They thought, "Here's this good thing! It would be wonderful for me. But God is a withholding God. He's cheap. He is keeping me from something wonderful. So I'll eat."

If they knew the lavish generosity of God they would have known that for whatever reason God told them not to eat that tree, it wasn't out of stinginess or meanness, but out of goodness.

All of his prohibitions, all of his commands, are the overflow of a generous heart, not a heart that is trying to keep us from some good thing and protect his stash of blessings from us. But to give to us.

His command for you to be honest in your business is not to keep you from something good like a raise or promotion. It's to give you something good, like Himself.

His command for you to be faithful to your spouse is not a command to keep you from happiness, but to give you happiness in his presence.

God gives.

But they didn't trust that or believe it, so they ate and received a curse.

But God, in His generosity, didn't allow the story to end there. He kept giving, He gave his son to give his life so we could have that curse lifted.

Belief in that God must change us.

At the heart of the Gospel is a God who has shown Himself to be infinitely generous and unsparing toward us in giving His son. Which gives us confidence that He'll generously give us everything we need for life and godliness and joy.

So Jesus says because that is true, keep going. Keep going hard after God.

The promise we have is that if we keep seeking, as dark as it gets, as many losses as we might experience, as alone as we might feel at times, we have a God who promises to help in time.

Hebrews 10:23-25 “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. **24** And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, **25** not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

Hebrews 10:32–39 [32] But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, [33] sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. [34] For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. [35] Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. [36] For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. [37] For,

“Yet a little while,
and the coming one will come and will not delay;
[38] but my righteous one shall live by faith,
and if he shrinks back,
my soul has no pleasure in him.”

[39] But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

Luke 11:5-10 [5] And he said to them, “Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves, [6] for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him’; [7] and he will answer from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything’? [8] I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs. [9] And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. [10] For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.

We have to have confidence that God answers those who seek Him.

This is what drove St. Patrick.

He was born in Britain, but when he was a young man he was captured by the Picts, who used to send raiding parties into his town. He was forced into slavery where he was a shepherd for 6 years before he escaped back home.

He knew some people had been sent to evangelize Ireland, but they hadn't been successful. And eventually their need was too great for him to ignore. So he headed back over, where others had failed, confident in God.

And he worked hard, constantly facing the possibility of martyrdom by the Druids. He was also mocked by people inside the church back home, saying he only went into the ministry so he could have title and position. He faced constant obstacles, but had learned during his captivity to seek the Lord in prayer.

And as a result of his prayerful confidence in God, the island was converted to Christianity in rapid fashion, and he pioneered maybe the most successful evangelistic effort in Christian history. Within a couple of generations the Irish were sending missionaries out around the world.

And according to tradition at least, this was part of Patrick's prayer:

I arise today, through
God's strength to pilot me,
God's might to uphold me,
God's wisdom to guide me,
God's eye to look before me,
God's ear to hear me,
God's word to speak for me,
God's hand to guard me,
God's shield to protect me,
God's host to save me
From snares of devils,
From temptation of vices,
From everyone who shall wish me ill,
afar and near.

I summon today all these powers between me and those evils,
Against every cruel and merciless power
that may oppose my body and soul,
Against incantations of false prophets,
Against black laws of pagandom,
Against false laws of heretics,
Against craft of idolatry,
Against spells of witches and smiths
and wizards,
Against every knowledge that corrupts
man's body and soul;
Christ to shield me today

Against poison, against burning,
Against drowning, against wounding,
So that there may come to me an
abundance of reward.

Christ with me,
Christ before me,
Christ behind me,
Christ in me,
Christ beneath me,
Christ above me,
Christ on my right,
Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down,
Christ when I sit down,
Christ when I arise,
Christ in the heart of every man who
thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who
speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.

If we are captivated by the Gospel picture of a God who is for us and gives good gifts to us and rewards those who seek Him, we can keep on seeking his reign.

Prayer of Confession:

Father, we confess that we are quick to quit seeking, asking, and knocking. If we believed you were as generous and responsive as you are, we'd pray continually. But our faith fails us, and we are tempted often to quit seeking your rule over our lives. Forgive us.

Jesus, we thank you that you only always did the will of your Father. You lived in constant fellowship with Him, constant prayer, constant dependence. And He did not disappoint: raising you up after your death to seat at his right hand. Thank you for your faithful and perfect perseverance, and that you substitute it for our failed efforts to keep going.

Holy Spirit, let us believe that we have a generous God. Let us pray continually. Let the message of the cross of Jesus, where the care and generosity of God is on full display, penetrate deeply into our hearts so that our lives would be characterized by a continued pursuit of your ever-expanding good and benevolent rule over our lives.

Assurance:

Romans 5:1-2 “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Through him we have also obtained access by faith 2 into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”

Sermon Discussion Questions:

- 1) Why do you suppose so many who claim to become Christians do not persevere in the faith?
- 2) What resources does God give so that we might persevere?
- 3) How does our view of God’s generosity affect our persevering in the faith? How does it affect our prayer lives?
- 4) Why do you think we are repeatedly reminded to pray in the sermon on the mount? What in this context do we need help with?