

***Basic Training: Golden Gifts***  
***By Jason Huff***  
***May 23, 2015***  
***Psalm 105:1-4; 2 Corinthians 9:8-11; Matthew 7:7-12***

Friends, our final Scripture reading tonight comes from Matthew 7:7-12. Let's listen to God's Word. "Ask and it will be given to 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! So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets."

Back a dozen years ago, I was a fan of a quirky Christian rock band called The Billions. I read a rumor on the Internet that the band had something called the Red Disc, a CD you couldn't buy in stores or online. I didn't know if it was true or somebody pulling a prank. So I went to the show and checked out their merchandise table afterwards. There were T-shirts and CDs, but no Red Disc. One of the band members, Ken, was behind the table and asked what I was looking for. I said, "This might sound crazy, but I've heard something about a Red Disc?"

Ken's eyes got big and he got a huge smile on his face. "The Red Disc!" he exclaimed, and he shook my hand and pulled out a CD case that was, in fact, all different shades of red. It was a collection of outtakes, demos, and songs the band had put together when they were just teenagers in high school. I asked, "How much is it?" And he said, "It's free. We give it out to anyone who asks. If you know enough to ask for it, it's yours." He was so excited that somebody who'd come to see them in this small Indiana town knew enough to ask.

That story and Ken's excitement came to mind this week as I studied this passage. We have a God who loves to give good gifts, for free, to us – to His children! What He gives us is far more valuable than a CD's worth of songs. He gives us all that we need and so much more. He is generous to us. We've learned that from our study of the Sermon on the Mount, but there's something special about today's passage. We're going to seek to understand it, how it ties into the Golden Rule of doing to others as we would have done to us, and how it can change us.

Isn't it amazing that God wants to give us good gifts? Most of us were raised to think of God that way, but people didn't think of gods that way in earlier times. You appeased your gods; you sacrificed to them to keep them from being upset with you. If something went wrong in your life, you figured out which god was angry and you went to their temple to make amends with a sacrifice. People prayed to their gods, but mostly out of fear, to stay out of trouble. The gods might take pity on you, but they weren't in the business of giving gifts. The priests of pagan religions would try to force the gods' hands. They would shout for hours on end; they would cut themselves. Magic – the kind condemned in the Bible – was an attempt to learn the right words to say and sacrifices to make so that a god had to listen to you and had to do what you wanted.

On the other hand, YHWH, our God, has always been generous to those who asked. From the exodus from Egypt to the establishment of judges over Israel, God answers prayer requests. God sends rain and withholds it because His prophets ask. The book of Psalms records at least 150 different prayers for us of God's people making requests. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit whom we meet through Scripture are gift-givers to those who believe, trust, and obey.

Jesus says tonight that God will respond to the one who asks, seeks, and knocks. The promise is made twice, and it's open to everyone who would come before God earnestly. Why the repetition? First, it confirms the promise. We often doubt that God is going to come through for us. We often say we don't want to bother God, when really it means we don't want to be disappointed if our prayer isn't answered. But the repetition shows that Jesus expects us to earnestly ask. He will give good gifts! It's a vow so good, you don't want to miss it.

The repetition also shows us that prayer is a continuing action in the here and now. You could easily translate the Greek, "Be asking...be seeking...be knocking." We're to be at the Father's ear regularly; we're to be searching with our spiritual flashlight each day; we're to keep pounding at the door until somebody opens it. God wants us to be in fellowship with Him, in relationship to Him, and that happens as day after day, we come to Him.

Sometimes I think, "If God knows what I need before I know I need it, why do I need to ask at all? Why do I need to keep asking? Why do I have to wait?" These questions stop us from praying as often as we should, and sometimes from praying at all. Let's consider them.

First, just because *God* knows what we need doesn't mean that *we* do. We often learn what we want and need by asking for them over time. How do I know what my boys want for Christmas? They ask over and over again. Now the boys don't ask for a lot; they're good about that. But some things they ask for excite them for a moment, then they never ask again. Those things that they genuinely want, however, they continue to ask about. They clarify for themselves what they want by sorting out what they ask for. In the same way, God wants us to ask for many reasons, but one is for us to grow in our self-understanding.

We also learn about patience and appreciating things because we don't have them yet. Tomorrow I'll watch the Indianapolis 500 – the greatest spectacle in racing. Part of why it's so special is because it only comes around once a year. Now I could watch other races, but they just don't compare, at least not to me, having grown up in Indy. Waiting makes a lot of things more special, whether it's a movie you've been waiting for a year or the game between Michigan and Michigan State. Sometimes, God has us wait so we appreciate the gifts we receive.

Second, when we expect things to get done in the everyday world, we know we have to ask, seek, and knock. Nobody's going to come fix our AC without making a phone call. Nobody's going to open a door if we don't ring the doorbell first. And then what do we have to do? We have to wait. If we're lucky, the repairman gives us a three-hour window when he'll arrive. It takes somebody a while to come to the door, and that's only if they aren't occupied or don't think you're a salesman!

What happens if we stop waiting, looking, or knocking? Things don't get done. The AC doesn't get fixed. The lost earring gets deeper into the carpet. It's considered rude to knock on someone's door and not wait for them to come. So why shouldn't we have to wait on God? He is not Santa Claus, and He's not a genie. He cannot be pushed around. It's OK to wait on Him.

And the wait is worth it. God gives good gifts because He is our Father. He is not only our maker, but He's our loving Father, better than any earthly father could be. Jesus puts out a wild thought – you dads, would you give your son a stone or a snake rather than bread or a fish? No father worth anything would ever think of it!

Jesus calls those hearing him evil – and He doesn't mean that we do the worst possible thing all the time. Without the light of the Holy Spirit and faith in Christ, we are opposed to God. We don't want anything to do with Him. To be evil is to reject God. But even people who reject God know how to give good gifts. God has made that a part of human nature.

If people opposed to God and inclined towards evil can give excellent gifts, then how much better a gift-giver is the perfect, loving, forgiving, generous Father in heaven? There's no comparison! Unlike our earthly parents, God knows exactly what will help us and what won't. He knows what will strengthen our faith and what will weaken it. He knows how much we can have that won't take our eyes off of Him. He's the perfect gift-giver!

Does God giving good gifts mean some requests are ignored? Absolutely. Isn't that awesome? God is not in the business of giving us snakes and stones. But sometimes, that's exactly what we ask for. How many times do we find out what we want is not what we need? I remember as a young film fan that I really wanted a laserdisc player. Any of you know what a laserdisc player was? It was a step up from the old VHS tapes we all used to have. For film buffs, it was a big deal – better picture and sound. But the discs were the size of records, and a movie could easily cost \$50-100. You had to flip the disc in the middle of the movie. And when DVD came out, which was far better, laserdiscs instantly disappeared. They became worthless. I thought laserdiscs were cool, but I'm glad I didn't throw my money down the drain!

What other gifts do we ask for that God doesn't grant? Sometimes it's a romantic relationship or a family. Sometimes it's good health or wisdom. Often it's a nice house or car. But God gives good gifts to those who keep asking. If your request isn't immediately answered, there are two possibilities – God wants you to keep asking so that the desire either grows stronger or you realize you don't need it, or He says “no” because He's got better gifts in mind for you. But how are we to know? Keep asking!

Never stop praying about everything! By that I mean, approach God intentionally with your requests. Don't hope for it; don't wish for it. Don't let it be an idea in your head. Speak to God about it. Take the time specifically to address God. Believe that He gives good gifts, and if what you're asking for is God's will for you, God will grant it at the perfect time. Speak to Him every day. Are you serious about what you are praying for? Then pray for it every day! It's a great way to examine our own hearts. If something really and truly matters to us, and we are faithful followers of Christ, we will continue to bring it up to Him.

And don't be discouraged. Your request isn't granted for a week, a month, a year, maybe ever? If you keep approaching God, He grants you the gift of His presence with you, His listening ear. That's not the only gift He'll give, but it's the greatest gift. Because what's more important, the gift or the Giver? After Christmas, I don't say thank you to my gifts. I don't say, "Oh sweater, thank you so much for letting me wear you and keeping me warm in the Michigan winter!" No! I say to Catha or my mom or the boys, "Thank you for thinking of me." Ask, and not only will you receive, you will receive the Spirit. Seek God's gifts, and you will find the Father too. Knock, and not only will the door open, Christ will be the One opening the door.

In our final minutes, let's talk about the Golden Rule. I've never heard anybody connect it with God's gift-giving, but Jesus does. Jesus uses the word "so" to connect it to His previous statement. Why do we practice the Golden Rule? Because we've seen the grace of God in our lives. He has gifted us. He has shown kindness to us. When we practice the Golden Rule, doing unto others as we would have done unto us, we are imitating Jesus, who did this throughout His ministry. We follow the pattern of giving good gifts as we've been given them.

The Golden Rule sums up the Law and the Prophets. This is HUGE. Jesus takes the thousand pages that make up the Old Testament and said, "This is all of it in a nutshell." He's not saying it replaces the Old Testament, but it's the kind of life that all the codes and stories and poetry and prophecy point us towards.

The Golden Rule is unique. Many cultures have a negative Golden Rule – "don't do to others what you don't want done to you." But Jesus makes it something to actively do. The negative version is hands-off; Jesus' version is hands-on. The negative version results in isolation; it puts no moral requirements on us other than to leave people alone. Jesus' version requires us to engage with others, to work on behalf of others. It also requires us to understand godliness, ourselves, and what we really want.

When we get past the superficial, what do we want done to us? Well, what things have people done for us that are good for us? All of us have someone who gave us food and shelter and clothing at their expense. Most of us work or have worked at some point in time because someone hired us for a job. Some of you are here tonight because CrossWay offered help through our food pantry.

On a deeper spiritual level, we're all here tonight because someone, somewhere, either invited us to come to church or brought us up in the church. Long before any of us were born, faithful women and men sacrificed in incredible ways so that we, today, could know the love of Jesus Christ. They faced violence and death, they traveled across oceans, they preached, they taught, they gave, so that others would come to have faith in Jesus Christ and know His salvation. That's a genuinely good thing that many people over the centuries did for us.

So how do we fulfill the Golden Rule? We help those who come into our sphere of influence as God directs, as God gives gifts to us we can share. Jesus didn't say this to make us feel guilty but to show us a new way of life. Our resources are limited. We can't help everyone. World Vision raises over \$2 billion a year, yet they just scratch the surface of world hunger. But as we give what we can, no matter how much, we spread Christ's light in the darkness.

If we do unto others as we would have done unto us, what we do is done in the name of Jesus Christ. If we give funds or groceries or a job to someone, if we paint a house or type a resume or run a daycare, but we leave Jesus out of it, we've missed the boat. I don't want someone to have a beautiful house and then die without knowing Jesus Christ. I don't want someone to get a bag of groceries from us without knowing God, the real giver behind that gift.

We don't have to be “in your face” about it. In fact, we'll talk about that more in our YouPick series this summer, how to share your faith in a friendly and inviting way rather than as a jerk. But we who are believers know that Jesus is the best thing in our lives. He transforms and changes our lives. When we do, we do for Christ and make Him known.

What other things might affect how we do what we do? A few things came to mind this week. We can do for others without obligating them. People need gifts without strings attached. Scripture tells us that our salvation is a free gift, something from God that we cannot repay – and we don't have to! Obedience to God comes when we realize we've been given a free gift and rejoice that we don't have to pay it back. We obey out of love for the giver, not to pay back the gift. So let's give, no strings attached.

In the same way, let's do for others without expecting an immediate reward or recognition. When we do unto others well, a lot of times, what we do will go unnoticed, and that's OK. As we learned a few weeks ago, God will reward those things we do that are unseen.

And let's be not only generous, but extravagant. Extravagance doesn't necessarily mean expensive but deeply thoughtful. Our pantry can't afford to give a lot away, but we have always worked to give away items that others don't give that can't be bought with a Bridge card – toiletries, paper towels, toilet paper, things we often take for granted but mean the world when you can't buy them. These are only a couple of ideas. What ways is God calling you to do unto others? Ask Him. He might use you to give someone else one of those good gifts He promises!

Friends, we live in the light of our Savior Jesus Christ. We have been given the most excellent gift of salvation. God gives us so many more gifts; He provides what we need, and often even things that just bring us joy. If we know the joy of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then it's not burden to give that love away to others. Let's try that this week.