



THE CONFIDENCE TO CARE

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

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Matthew 7:7-12

21st Message

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As we come to the climax of our Lord's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount I am reminded of an incident from C. S. Lewis' "Chronicles of Narnia." In this encounter from the second book, "Prince Caspian," Lucy finally sees Aslan the lion, who symbolizes Christ:

As she again gazed into his large wise face, he said, "Welcome, child."

"Aslan," said Lucy, "you're bigger."

"That is because you are older, little one," answered he.

"Not because you are?"

"I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger."

It is my prayer that as a result of these studies from the gospel of Matthew, your view of God is becoming larger; and that you are sensing to a greater degree the assurance of his love and the strength of his power in your daily life.

One reason why many of us don't experience God's love and power is that we are too self sufficient. We don't realize that when it comes to being godlike, we don't have what it takes. "We are all ordinary people," said G.K. Chesterton, "and it is the extraordinary people who know it." The problem with many of us is that we are perilously adequate. As my friend David Roper writes: "We go our way believing in ourselves, our own power and personalities, relying on our own strength and show. But our self-confidence becomes a stumbling block. We are so good at what we do, we are no good at all. In terms of eternal significance, unaided humanity is useless!"

So God must thwart our energy at its source. He wears down our noble resolve through the frustrations of life, wringing out of us every vestige of self-confidence by disappointment and defeat. He allows our cherished projects to flounder; the wheels fall off our cleverly contrived programs; our dreams go belly up. He tutors us through our flops and failures until we learn that most precious of all of God's premises: We can't! And all of this is so that we might learn true confidence in dependence. Because when "can-do" can't, he tells us that he can, and therefore we can. Our strength, our ability to be God's men and women, to be what he has called us to be, flows from our relationship with him and our dependence on him. It takes God to be a man or woman. It takes God to make us godlike in the world.

That is what Jesus emphasizes throughout the Sermon on the Mount. It is why he began his remarks with the words, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Count yourself blessed when you realize at last that you are spiritually bankrupt. And so we come to what we have described as the climax of Jesus' teaching. Chapter 7, verse 7:

"Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it shall be opened. Or what man is

there among you, when his son shall ask him for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or if he shall ask for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him! (Matt 7:7-11, NASB)

We might ask why the Lord introduces the subject of prayer at this juncture. What relationship do these verses have to the section we looked at last week?

The answer is simple: Prayer is the key to everything! Prayer is the highest expression of our dependence on God. Jesus has been talking about a righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees, a deep down righteousness that exhibits itself in godlike behavior wherever we go. And who can live like that? I can't! You can't! Therefore we need to ask God to give us what we need to accomplish what he asks.

Jesus is talking about our asking for character needs. We must ask for love, joy, peace, patience, self control, all those attributes of Christ's life that we need to display in the world. Our Lord is saying: "When you need them, just ask for them. When you seek for satisfaction, for something to fill you, ask God for it." God is a Father who gives. Do you need more love to live with that person you are with? Just ask for it. Do you need patience to bear up in that situation you are in? Just ask him. Do you need strength and moral courage today to resist the evil one? Whatever your need, just ask God and receive it from his hand. The only stipulation is that we must keep on asking. That is, we must be continually dependent on God.

What wonderful promises these are! Jesus is imprinting them on our minds through repetition. Notice the ascending scale of urgency in his direct commands: Ask...seek...knock. I see this occur regularly in our home in the interaction between our youngest son Timothy and his mother. If Kathy is nearby or visible, Timothy will ask. If he can't see her, he will seek. And if she is inaccessible in her room, he will knock. All three verbs which Jesus is quoted as using are present imperatives, implying that we should keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking.

The Greek language has many verb tenses that we don't have in English, and this makes it difficult to convey some ideas. I might illustrate the point that Jesus is making in this way. As our monthly electrical bill increases, I often remind my sons to turn off lights when they leave the house. Supposing one of my sons were to leave the house without doing that, and I were to instruct him in Greek, "Turn off the light!" I would probably use an aorist imperative, saying, "Go back and turn out the light." If, however, I called all four boys together and I said, "Turn out the lights," I would use a present tense imperative—the same tense that Jesus uses here. The point of my instruction

would be, keep turning off the lights as a pattern of life. That is what Jesus is saying.

Now our pattern of life ought to be to keep on asking of our heavenly Father! When we get up in the morning, the first thing we ought to do is talk to him. We should thank him for being there and being available. Let us take everything he gives us, receiving every attribute he bestows upon us. If we are moody in the morning, thank him that he is our joy and peace. Through the day as pressures arise, just keep on asking and receiving. Do you have a problem with worry? Then you need to pray. Do you have a problem with a critical and judgmental spirit? Talk to God about it and ask him for help. Do you have a problem with money and materialism? Pray to your father who loves to give good gifts.

In the parallel passage in Luke, the “good thing” that God gives is identified as the Holy Spirit. That is how we know that Jesus is speaking about character here. Luke’s rendition of this statement goes as follows: “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 the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” God will give you what you need. He will give you the resource to be good—the Spirit who is holy.

Jesus illustrates his promise with a very homely parable. He imagines a situation we all are very familiar with, a child coming to his father with a request. Which of you, he says, if your son asks for something wholesome to eat [that would be a miracle in itself!] (bread or fish), will give him something unwholesome, either inedible (a stone), or harmful (a poisonous snake). Of course, no one would do such a thing.

What father does not love to give good gifts to his children? A loving father seeing his child’s basic needs certainly would not intentionally give him something that would harm him. But the people of Jesus’ day really believed that was what the gods did. The gods could not be trusted. People believed they were mean and nasty, tricky and unreliable. Whenever the gods gave something there was always some sort of thorn hidden in the gift. There is a well known story in Greek mythology about the young goddess Aurora. She fell in love with a mortal, and she asked Zeus to give her lover immortality, because she wanted to live with him forever. Zeus played a trick on her. He gave the young man immortality, but he did not give him perpetual youth. He would get older and older, but he would not die. That is how pagans thought the gods acted, in mean and capricious ways.

But Jesus says that God the Father gives good gifts to his children. He is our Abba, our Daddy, who wants to give us what we need.

A lot of people imagine that God is a cranky old man who is forever out of sorts. They think he is so insecure that when people don’t respond to his love, he stomps around heaven shouting judgments and becoming angry at everyone because he can’t get it right. What a false impression of our loving heavenly Father! We are deeply loved by God. That is what Jesus is saying. God is a Father who wants to give, and he will always give what is good.

The point that Jesus is making is that though we as fathers are flawed and sinful, and thus our motives can oftentimes be questioned, yet we give good gifts. Even when we are doing good we can’t get away from the designation “evil,” because that is what we are—self-centered crea-

tures. The force of the parable lies more in a contrast than a comparison between our earthly and our heavenly fathers. Jesus is saying: “You don’t think that the Father who is perfect will give less than that, do you?” The God we are coming to is our Abba Father, and he is infinitely good and kind. God is good, as good as we are capable of imagining him to be. He is the only One who is good. That is what Jesus himself said, “no one is good but God.”

I am convinced that everything the devil does is designed for one purpose only, and that is to draw us away from God’s love. He wants to get us to believe that God is not good. If he can succeed in doing that we are in trouble, because we will want to take charge of our lives. It is not so much that the devil hates us, but that he hates God and will do anything to break his heart. And nothing breaks God’s heart more than being separated from those he loves. Because of that, let us keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking—because we will receive.

Some of you here this morning have brothers and sisters, parents and children or very good friends who do not know Jesus Christ. You have been praying for them for a long time. Yesterday, I led the funeral of an eighty-nine year-old man who met the Lord in the eighty-eighth year of his life. His family had prayed for him for years. The lesson is clear: Don’t stop praying! Don’t throw in the towel. Our Father listens and he hears our prayers. He will answer them according to his script, not ours.

Are you in the midst of a crisis at home? Are you having trouble in your relationship with your spouse or your parents? There are no promises that God will make your home into the place you long for, but he has promised to give you stability and supernatural help when the heat is on and all hell breaks loose. You can trust him even though others never come through for you.

Some of you struggle with a habitual sin in your life. Just when you see signs of progress you fall on your face. What you must do is believe God when he says “sin will not have dominion over you.” Keep trusting his word. Pick yourself up and go on even though you keep falling down. Don’t give up. One day you will be perfectly pure, even though today you are not. Will you trust Jesus and side and struggle with him against your sin?

Some of you are out of work and you are depleting your precious savings. You are beginning to wonder if the right job is ever going to come along. You must continue to believe that God will not leave you or forsake you; that he knows your needs and will not withhold any good thing; that you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you.

Certainly one of the good gifts that our heavenly Father gives us is his love, the “fruit of the Spirit.” So Jesus continues with these famous words which we have come to know as the Golden Rule. Verse 12:

“Therefore, however you want people to treat you, so treat them, for this is the Law and the Prophets. (7:12)

Every religion in the world has a statement similar to this, but every one of them is negative. Confucius is credited with having said: “Do not do to others what you would not wish done to yourself.” In 20 BC, someone asked the famous Rabbi Hillel to teach him the whole law while standing on one foot. He responded: “What is hateful to you, do not do to anyone else. This is the whole law; the rest is only commentary.”

But there is a huge difference between that negative saying and the positive initiative contained in Jesus' command. The negative command is passive. Let me put it this way. If I were to ask myself, "What don't I want?" one thing I certainly would not want is for someone to hit me on the head, so to avoid that I would not hit anyone. But if this is how we act we will spend all of life going around doing nothing. Jesus states it positively: He says we are responsible to take the initiative. Do you love to be loved (and who doesn't)? Then you ought to act lovingly. Do you love to be appreciated? Then how much time do you spend expressing appreciation to those who love and serve you? The positive is so much more penetrating than the negative.

John Stott reminds us: "Self-love is a very powerful force in our lives. We spend a great deal of time and energy protecting and trying to gain the best for ourselves. Now that we are in Christ, we are to take this bent toward self-advantage, which guides our behavior, and let it guide our behavior toward others." All we have to do is use our imagination. We have to put ourselves in the other person's shoes and ask, "How would I like to be treated in this situation?" As Bishop Ryle wrote: "It settles a hundred difficult points...it prevents the necessity of laying down endless little rules for our conduct in specific cases. In fact, it is a principle with such wide application that Jesus adds, 'for this is the Law and the Prophets.'" You don't need to ask the question many ask themselves at times: "What would Jesus do in this situation?" To that, Jesus would say: "How would you like to be treated?" That is what you should do.

There is a strong connection between these two, the command to live dependently on God and the command to love. As someone has put it, "By love our love is inspired." In other words, it is because of the love of God for us being poured into our hearts that we can now love and care for others. That is the key to love! It's not gritting your teeth and determining to act loving. Love flows naturally from a heart that is conscious of being loved. When Jesus had difficulty loving the disciples, he didn't take a deep breath and try to be nice. He began to reflect on how the Father loved him and how wonderful it was to be approved and loved of God. He strengthened and steadied himself with the fact that the Father cherished him. That is why he went away to a hillside to pray and renew himself in the Father's love. Afterwards he could come back and endure with patience the futilities and follies of those twelve men.

The way to love other people is to remind yourself of how much God loves you. When someone irritates you, review Christ's love for you. Stop and think of what the Lord did for you. He gave up his life for you. Think of how patient he is with you; how much he cares for you; how patient he is with your failures; how he supports you and acknowledges you as one of his own; how he tenderly provides for you. It is that wellspring of love that will enable you to love others, because you can't love from a vacuum.

I know that it's hard to love people at times, especially since we are born into this world as self-centered individuals. But once we gain an understanding of the intensity and immensity of God's love for us we can grow in our ability to love people just as they are. We can begin to accept them and love them as God loves us. Then, instead of

thinking only about ourselves and our things, we can begin to be more generous with our time and our toys. We can devote our energy and efforts for the sake of others. That is the radical change that comes when the love of God is poured into our hearts.

The Christian life is not difficult, it is impossible! I am not the kind of person who does this kind of thing naturally—and neither are you! That is why, unless the Holy Spirit takes up residence in our lives and Christ lives through us, we will never do unto others what we want them to do for us. That is a supernatural lifestyle. As Thomas Merton put it: "A saint is not someone who is good but someone who experiences the goodness of God." This is how we are called to live as Christians.

I want to close by reading a very moving piece that helps in applying Jesus' words. It is called "I Wish I'd Reached Her," by Harold Myra. These words will be especially meaningful to high schoolers and college students:

Lord, I never said anything nasty,
but I admit I never accepted her—
not as an equal.
She was a spinster at 17,
and she always would be.
She reminded me of a skinny, leafless tree
trying to grow on an expressway divider—
surrounded by concrete and grumbling cars,
roots into grass so sparse and exhaust-choked,
other life avoided her.
Even as a little kid,
she must have been like that,
alone, avoided,
life roaring past her
with no apology for the fumes.
Who hugged the girl but her mother?
Her face was angular, all bones, dark shadows,
touches of black facial hair.
In a car full of kids,
I ducked to the back seat
to make sure no one got the idea
she was with me.

She became very religious
and even went off to Bible school.
I remember driving her somewhere
while she was full of joy and resolutions.
"No Bible, no breakfast," she told me,
saying how vital
you were to her.
And that summer she got pregnant.
That was the end of her bright new life—
you don't go off to Bible school
with a baby in your tummy.
I wondered, then, unkindly,
what hard-up misfit had touched her,
had treated her like a person,
had held her with affection,
and suddenly nothing mattered to her
so much as being
held . . .

I don't know about that summer.
But one thing she needed
besides her Bible and Prayers:
Christ to come alive in friends.
Could I have touched her on the shoulder,
laughed with her?
Could the girls have been more like sisters
than superior beings?
Maybe she could have found a love
that wouldn't have left her pregnant and alone.

Maybe she could have been strong
and chosen for herself,
if she'd found more of you in some of us.

Beautiful kids have more fun, don't they?
They're the only ones who drink Pepsi,
laughing like Nordic gods.
They're the only ones who splash down rapids
with glistening teeth to commercial music.
They're the only ones who look so sexily tanned
(are they the only ones with glands?).
You tell us, Lord,
"Don't be conformed to the world's standards;
don't be pressed into its mold,"
but it's been flashed into our brains
in such volume the images drip over the edges.
And the grubby look of jeans
can't change the mental machinery
and the vicious social games we play.

Yesterday,
I sat in a restaurant full of college kids
and a group of girls noisily sat down.
They looked over at a pimple-faced guy
two tables away,
and I heard one snicker,
"Oh, yuck!"
What a thing to say of a human!
How many times does a guy have to hear
Oh, yuck!
before he believes—really believes—
"I am garbage."
I am a walking, living, breathing
pile of trash?"

A couple weeks ago, in this same restaurant,
three guys and two girls came in.
One girl, fairly attractive
slid into a booth
and a guy slid in with her.
The other girl slipped in opposite them,
but neither guy would slide in by her.
They looked at each other awkwardly.
Neither wanted to sit by her.
In a few seconds, one guy succumbed,
but everybody knew it wasn't by choice;
his reputation was safe.

I wonder, Lord,
what those seconds did to that girl.
Did she feel like shrinking into her purse?
Did those snide hesitations
move her toward hating herself?
Lord, why do you let a girl's beliefs
about herself
be found in her mirror?
One girl believes herself a princess
and holds court.
Another girl believes,
because of the shape of her nose,
the toughness of her cheek,
that she's a dog.
And it permeates everything in her life:
this self-disrespect.
Lord, how could you
put all those glands in her,
those longings to be held,
and have her clasp empty air all her life?

I read in a survey once
that half the girls in America

never land one date in high school.
Yet our culture screams,
"A guy must touch you, kiss you,
or you're not really alive."
You hear the cruel asides in locker rooms,
"So many dogs around this school."

A girl rode our bus in high school.
She had orange, fuzzy hair,
wore outlandish clothes from her mother
and she drenched herself in perfume.
I suppose she was saying,
"Look at me! Look at me!
I'm not only human, I'm a woman!"
One day, she exploded at a senior guy—
she couldn't articulate cleverly—
it all came out in clichés like
"You, Mr. High and Mighty,
you think you're everything!"
Later I asked her brother,
"Have I ever given you that feeling—
that I'm better than you?"
He never did answer me,
but looked out the window at the trees.

I met this fuzzy-haired creature once,
alone between classes,
and asked her where a certain teacher was.
With just the two of us talking,
suddenly we were two humans,
like birds on the same rock,
no audience to play to,
no worries of who
would be associated with whom.
She answered my question,
and we talked a minute.
Although our words were no different,
the chemistry was altered.
For that moment. For about 90 seconds.
But never again.

How much have I grown, Lord,
beyond seeing friendships
as plus or minus status coupons?
Surely I don't still act that way!
But do I find more sophisticated ways
to shun the misfit?

Do I love the nobody,
the social embarrassment?

Lord, help me not to be molded
by the world's ad campaign
of luscious lovelies
and wind-blown men on boats and horses.
By your Spirit, help me to see
beneath the skin and posture, style and hair.
For I'm told you yourself, Jesus,
were nothing for looks
But you sure are worth getting to know . . .

As the love of God is poured out into our hearts it is my
prayer that we will treat others with kindness, goodness
and care, the way we want to be treated.

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