

# Persistence

## Matthew 7:7-11

**Series:** The Sermon on the Mount – Spring 2021

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**Worship:** God's Good Gifts

**Key Sentence:**

God always answers those who persistently pray for spiritual transformation.

**Outline:**

I. Our persistence and God's response (Matthew 7:7-8)

II. If even people give good things, how much more God? (Matthew 7:9-11)

**Matthew 7:7–11** “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. <sup>8</sup>For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.

<sup>9</sup>Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? <sup>10</sup>Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? <sup>11</sup>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!”

## Persistence

### Matthew 7:7-11

Persistence is one of those irritating words that even dictionaries tend to define using the word. Merriam-Webster, who I really think should know better, says “the action or fact of persisting.” Thanks. They do better with the definition of persist. To persist is to go on resolutely or stubbornly in spite of opposition, importunity, or warning; to be insistent in the repetition or pressing of an utterance (such as a question or an opinion). Vocabulary.com does the best because they don’t try for a formal definition. They say “Persistence is the ability to stick with something. If you practice the violin for over a year in order to play "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" perfectly, that's persistence!”

I like their use of an example, and it’s not hard to find examples on the web, because persistence is one of those qualities that every motivational speaker wants to cheer-lead. I recently read about the early days of SpaceX, when their first three Falcon 1 rockets failed spectacularly. They only made orbit on the 4<sup>th</sup> try. They seem to have had even more failures with Starship, but I wouldn’t bet against them. Henry Ford was the same way. His early businesses failed and left him broke 5 times before he founded Ford Motor Company.

American author Jack London received 600 rejections before his first story was accepted. Tom Clancy was rejected 12 times before somebody took a chance on *The Hunt for Red October*. A good recent book, *The Help* was written by Kathryn Stockett, who was herself rejected – herself, not her book – by 60 literary agents before one agreed to represent her. And maybe most famously, J. K. Rowling wrote her first book when she was jobless, divorced, penniless, and with a dependent child. Two years later her submission was rejected by all 12 major publishers. Rowling persisted and a year later, a small publisher gave her a tiny advance and published just 1000 copies of her book. *Harry Potter* has since sold more than 400 million copies.

You could go on and on. Everyone knows that it took Thomas Edison 1,000 attempts before inventing the light bulb. But did you know that Michael Jordan was cut from his high school basketball team? He wasn’t good enough. Walt Disney was told he couldn’t draw. Steven Spielberg got rejected from film school three times. Elvis Presley was fired after his first performance. Colonel Sanders knocked on 1000 doors at the age of 65 before someone was willing to try his grandma’s recipe for Kentucky Fried Chicken. This is persistence. My grandmother called it “stick-to-it-tive-ness.”

But is persistence a Christian quality? It depends what you persist in. If you persist in going your own way, that's not good. If you persist in sin, that's not good. If you persist in self-reliance, that's not good. But if you persist in following God, that's good. If you hunger and thirst for righteousness, that's good. If you persist in prayer, as Jesus seems to emphasize more than anything else, that's good. In today's text, Matthew 7:7-11, he teaches that God always answers those who persistently pray for spiritual transformation.

Let's read the text. Matthew 7:7-11 *“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. <sup>8</sup>For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. <sup>9</sup>Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? <sup>10</sup>Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? <sup>11</sup>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!”*

R. Kent Hughes starts his excellent discussion of these verses with the following two paragraphs: “There are two ways to approach the Sermon on the Mount. One is proudly, believing the Sermon is simply a list of exalted, though humanly attainable, moral precepts. Some who hold this view have said that the Sermon on the Mount is the only really necessary part of Scripture, the rest can be discarded, and people just need to give moral adherence to the Sermon. They say they love it because it is from Christ and is not cluttered with Paul's theologizing in the epistles. According to such persons, with some moral education and some discipline, the world will be revolutionized. This view, with its fleshly presumption about the goodness of man and an amazingly shallow view of the Sermon on the Mount, always brings failure.”

“The other (correct) view, approaches the Sermon on the Mount humbly, with a deep sense of the need for God's grace. Far from finding the Sermon untheological, those who hold this view see that the teachings of the Sermon are amazingly theological and profoundly requiring. In fact they require perfection, as Jesus says after its first great movement: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” Those holding this view understand the first Beatitude though moralists do not. They know it teaches that poverty of spirit, a sense of moral bankruptcy, and the realization that one cannot live the Sermon on the Mount by oneself, is the key to living the Sermon on the Mount. Thus they approach God as beggars and receive grace to do the impossible.”

He then goes on to say that in the text we just read, Jesus describes the way a man or woman prays who understands what the Sermon on the Mount is all about. The instruction in this text should not be lifted from its context and abused.

We've all heard this done. The Bible says, 'Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you.' Therefore, all we have to do is ask for something with faith and persistence and we will get it. So go for it! Name it and claim it!" God is a celestial slot machine. Pull the handle enough times in prayer, be persistent, and you will get what you want!

This is entirely wrong, because it pulls the text from the context. The Sermon on the mount has shown us the surpassing righteousness, humility, sincerity, purity, and love expected of those who belong to the kingdom. These virtues are beyond us apart from God's grace. Even in the preceding verses Jesus has shown us the danger of condemning others as if we were judges. He also has told us to get the log out of our own eye before we attempt to remove a speck from someone else's. His warning is, "For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you"

"This standard," Hughes says, "is terrifying. Who is adequate for such things? How can we live up to it? We need to be cleansed. We need help and grace, but from where?" Jesus answers, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you". This text is not the password for receiving all our material desires. Rather, it tells us how to pray for the character of the kingdom in our lives. It instructs us how to pray the Lord's Prayer. It teaches us to pray that our morals and ethics will be like Christ's. In a word, Jesus teaches us how to pray for our spiritual lives. Carson says "the Sermon on the Mount lays down the righteousness, sincerity, humility, purity, and love expected of Jesus' followers; and now it assures them such gifts are theirs if sought through prayer."

First, we are to pray with persistence. Verses 7 and 8 show us our persistence and God's response. "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. <sup>8</sup>For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened." Jesus could have just said "ask." A lot of prayer is asking for recognized needs. The word suggests humility. It is commonly used of one asking from a superior. But Jesus doesn't stop there. He brings in the element of persistence by adding "seek." You not only express need, but you earnestly look for the answer. Finally, "knock." Be so earnest in desiring this spiritual help that when the answer seems delayed, you pound on the door.

The stacking of these words is extremely forceful, but the fact that they are present imperatives gives them even more punch. In the Greek language there are two kinds of commands. The aorist imperative gives one definite command, such as "shut the door" or "pick up the newspaper."

The present imperative, however, commands continuous action—“keep on shutting the door” or “keep on picking up the newspaper.” So our text really reads: “Keep on asking and it will be given to you; keep on seeking and you will find; keep on knocking and the door will be opened to you.”

These verses call for persistence. When Luke records the same words, word-for-word, he precedes them with a parable. Luke 11:5-8 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, <sup>6</sup>for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him’; <sup>7</sup>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’? <sup>8</sup>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.” Then come the words of our text “So I say to you: 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”

Jesus is driving his point home: We are to passionately persist in prayer. We do persevere in some prayers. When someone close to us is sick, if one of our children becomes ill, we pray without ceasing. If we are in financial trouble or relational trouble, or if we have a frightening or dangerous task to do, we find it easy to pray. But do we persist in prayer for spiritual growth? Do we “ask ... seek ... knock” for a pure mind? Do we keep on knocking for a forgiving spirit or for the removal of anger or criticism? What would happen if our persistent prayer was more focused on our spiritual needs than on our physical, relational or financial needs? What answers might we see?

We will give ourselves to passionate prayer for our spiritual development only when we sense our need for God’s grace. We are called to be holy as God is holy, for it is the pure in heart who will see God. We know that though we do good things, we are evil, that all of us are under sin. Only this recognition of God’s perfect standard and our sin can drive us to our knees and to his grace. We learn that there is no hope apart from his unearned favor. There is no hope for spiritual improvement apart from his continuing love and mercy. We are to ask and keep on asking for those things that will make us more like Jesus. We are to seek and keep on seeking. We are to knock and keep on knocking.

Perseverance is the key to God’s treasure, just as it often proves to be with earthly treasures. When Howard Carter, the British archaeologist, peered wide-eyed into an ancient Egyptian tomb in 1922, at first he saw nothing.

For more than twenty centuries archaeologists, tourists, and tomb robbers had searched for the burial places of Egypt's pharaohs. It was believed that nothing remained undisturbed. With only a few scraps of evidence Carter carried on his pursuit, privately financed because nobody felt there was anything left to be discovered. But he was convinced there was one remaining tomb. Twice during his six-year search he came within two yards of the first stone step leading to the burial chamber. Finally he found it. "Can you see anything?" his assistants asked, as Carter's eyes adjusted. He was seeing, but he had difficulty speaking because he saw what no modern man had ever seen. Wooden animals, statues, chests, chariots, carved cobras, vases, daggers, jewels, a throne—and a hand-carved coffin of a teenage king. It was the priceless tomb and treasure of King Tutankhamen.

Howard Carter's great perseverance brought him King Tut's treasure. How much greater our rewards when we persevere in praying for God's spiritual treasures! King Tut's treasures brought him no happiness; and if you were as rich as he, the effect would be the same. Besides, King Tut left it all behind. But the treasures Christ gives are eternally ours and eternally satisfying. We may wonder why God wants us to persist intensely for things he surely wants to give us. The answer is, he wants to give us great spiritual treasures, but he will not give until we know we need it. It's like my favorite light bulb joke. "How many psychologists does it take to change a light bulb? Just one, but the light bulb has to really want to change?" Have you and I come this far in the Sermon on the Mount without really wanting to change? I hope not.

Jesus' words teach us that we are not only to pray with persistence, but with confidence. "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." If we persistently ask for increased spiritual growth and understanding and intimacy with God, we will receive. Again, these verses are not a blank check for just anything we want in life. God knows much better than we do what we need. Some of the things we pray for, whether riches or relationships, health or honor, safety or success might do us more harm than good. I heard one of my grandchildren 'praying' to his parents recently for more limes. He loves lime slices. But he's also subject to canker sores and his parents denied his prayer for his own good. Thank God he doesn't answer our every prayer or whim. The world would be in even more of a mess than it already is. We would be in more of a mess than we are.

On the other hand, how wonderful it is that God always answers our persistent prayers for spiritual growth. Jesus assures us this is true with illustrations from earthly fatherhood. "Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? <sup>10</sup>Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent?"

In Galilee where the Sermon on the Mount was preached, people were familiar with the flat stones by the shore that looked exactly like their round, flat cakes of bread, and with the snakes that inhabit those waters and look very much like the edible eels. Can you imagine your son coming to tell you he is hungry and you give him a stone instead of bread? “Here son, enjoy!” you say mockingly as he cracks his teeth. “Oh, you didn’t like that? Here, have a fish,” and you give him a poisonous snake. We’d like to think that fathers, and mothers, aren’t like that. And most aren’t, though sadly some are.

But God, Jesus is saying, always gives us what is good. Verse 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 here assumes, even asserts, the inherent sinfulness of human beings: you are evil. At the same time, he does not deny that evil people are capable of doing good. Evil parents often do good to their children. God’s common grace allows that. Human nature, though fallen is often not as evil as it could be. But even when people are doing good, following the noble instincts of parenthood and caring for their children, even then they do not escape the designation ‘evil’, for that is what human beings are.

The force of the parable lies in the difference between people at their best and an always good God. It’s the kind of comparison Jesus uses over and over, called an “a fortiori” argument: If it is true of the lesser, how much more of the greater. God is our Father, our true caregiver. The Psalmist teaches that “As a father shows compassion to his children so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.” Hebrews says that our human fathers “disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.” Think of our earthly fathers at their very best and improve them by infinity, and you come close to the fatherhood of God. Augustine put it well “For what would he not now give to sons when they ask, when he has already granted this very thing, namely, that they might be sons?”

God never errs. It is his will to give us more and better than we ask in our prayers, recognizing again that we are talking especially today about praying for and receiving the spiritual gifts required to live out the Sermon on the Mount. Luke’s parallel quotation of this makes it clear.. “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” Luke’s substitution of “Holy Spirit” for “good gifts” is no contradiction because it is the Holy Spirit who gives us what we need spiritually. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control – the very things needed to live out the Sermon on the Mount.

The Holy Spirit knows what we need better than we do! Paul tells us in Romans 8 that “the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. <sup>27</sup>And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”

Our assurance is this: God will give us anything that is good for us spiritually if we keep asking him for it! If you do not yet have eternal life through Jesus Christ, you may be sure he will give it to you if you ask with all your heart. If you are a believer but are short on Christian graces, you need to keep praying. If you often find yourself lying, if you begin to “ask” and “seek” and “knock,” God will help you become a truth-teller. If you are not generous, make a habit of passionate prayer and he will give you a generous spirit. If you are angry, if you are enslaved to lust, if you are unkind, pray – and God will answer. Think what would happen if we prayed for these things, for ourselves and our brothers and sisters, as intensely as we pray for our physical needs. God would transform lives. Maybe not the externals, but the heart, and relationships, and the living out of compassion and caring, of generosity and witness. We would be more who we say we are and who we want to be.

If this is our desire, we are free to do two things. First, ask persistently. Jesus says we are to ask and keep on asking, seek and keep on seeking, knock and keep on knocking. We are to beseech God constantly and passionately for spiritual blessing. Do we do that? At the same time we are free to ask confidently. Everyone who asks this way receives, and everyone who seeks like this finds, and everyone who knocks and keeps on knocking has the door opened to him. God will give us anything we ask for that is good for us spiritually.

I began this message with several examples of persistence, and we’ve seen others as we’ve gone along, but they have mostly been of the secular or life’s work variety. When I think of Christians who have prayed this way several examples come to mind. The most striking is Amy Carmichael. I’m sure some of you have read Elizabeth Elliot’s outstanding biography, *A Chance to Die*. One of the things that struck me the very first time I read it was Amy Carmichael’s commitment to prayer. Briefly, Amy Carmichael was a missionary to India. She had wanted to go to China, that didn’t work. She was in Japan for a little while. Her health failed. After a short time back in Ireland she went to India and stayed for fifty-five years without a furlough. She’s probably best known for rescuing young girls who had been sold into temple prostitution. She found the Dohnavur Fellowship, which continues to this day.

All through her life she wrote. She wrote books, she recorded prayers, she wrote thousands of notes and letters to the staff and children and supporters of the Dohnavur Fellowship. And all through her life she prayed. She counted on the absolute truth of verses like the ones we've been studying today, praying with radical dependence for both physical and spiritual needs. She prayed for herself, her own spiritual needs, openly, honestly and transparently. She spent the last twenty years of her life as in invalid, bedridden by a hip injury, and in constant pain. Yet she wrote "Our dear Lord listens to the prayer that goes not out of feigned lips, and it is written for our comfort that he causes those who love Him to inherit substance, the wonderful "substance" that is of "grace unto grace," the perpetual gift of His fullness. This grace is no mere "impersonal substance," but God working in us, the Lord in action in our very springs of thought and will." Those are the things she prayed for, and I close with one well-known example, a prayer that has come to be called "Flame of God."

"From prayer that asks that I may be sheltered from winds that beat on Thee, From fearing when I should aspire, From faltering when I should climb higher— From silken self, O Captain, free Thy soldier who would follow Thee.

From subtle love of softening things, From easy choices, weakenings, (Not thus are spirits fortified, Not this way went the Crucified.) From all that dims Thy Calvary, O Lamb of God, deliver me.

Give me the love that leads the way, The faith that nothing can dismay, The hope no disappointments tire, The passion that will burn like fire; Let me not sink to be a clod—Make me Thy fuel, Flame of God!

Yeah. That's asking, seeking, knocking for the things that are important. And the loving Father will not fail to answer such prayer – though he will make us to persist, for such prayer cannot fully and finally answered this side of eternity.

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R. Kent Hughes concludes his commentary on this section with the following practical advice: "Someone once said, "Any discussion of the doctrine of prayer that does not issue in the practice of prayer is not only not helpful, but harmful." That is true. We would all do well to engage in the following actions: 1. Search out some spiritual qualities that you lack but would like to have. List them on a prayer list or a three by five card or an app on your phone. 2. Pray passionately and persistently for them—keep asking, seeking, knocking. 3. Have confidence that God your Father will give them to you.