

**Understanding The Golden Rule**  
**Matthew 7:7-12**  
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The Gospel of Matthew opens with a series of proofs that Jesus is the Christ, the King of the Jews. This led to the calling of His disciples and His instruction to them through the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5-7. These chapters are the first of five long discourses by Jesus that Matthew recorded in his Gospel. After correcting the traditional teaching of the Jewish leaders (Matthew 5:21-48), and after rebuking the self-serving religious practices of the Jewish leaders (Matthew 6:1-18), Jesus addresses the importance of faith in God rather than in money. We should seek His kingdom and He will provide our needs so there is no reason to worry (Matthew 6:25-34).

Matthew 7:1-5 is a transition from how to think about our own life to how to think about the lives of others. This chapter of Matthew begins with the command to not judge. This is forbidding unrighteous judgment since Jesus in John 7:24 called us to righteous judgment.

Matthew 7:6 is the natural follow-up to Matthew 7:1-5 since it replaces unrighteous judgment with a proper evaluation of others. Righteous judgment requires discernment regarding how and when to minister the word of God to the lives of those whom we encounter. This practice of making a righteous judgment on the lives and conduct of others lies at the heart of Matthew 7:6 and requires an analysis of what type of judgment is valid according to God's word.

**The context**

There is an issue about how the topic of Matthew 7:7-11 relates to the surrounding context. At first look, it does not appear that the subject of prayer has much connection at all to the issues of unrighteous judgment (7:1-5) or righteous discernment (7:6). Also, the connection between prayer and the golden rule is not easily grasped by commentators of the Sermon on the Mount.

Most view Matthew 7:12 as a summary statement for a much larger section, going back to Matthew 5:21. This is primarily because it is difficult to see the connection with the immediate context. The topic of prayer in 7:7-11 is seen separately and this leaves 7:12 as a Golden Rule to summarize all of Jesus' teaching.

This problem of connecting prayer in 7:7-11 with judgment in 7:1-6 can be helped greatly by viewing the Golden Rule in 7:12 related to the immediate context of 7:7-11. In other words, the “therefore” of Matthew 7:12 summarizes the teaching of prayer in 7:7-11. This view fits the overall context since it is odd for a final summary statement to be made fifteen verses before the end of the sermon.

### **The imperative to pray (7:7-8)**

Matthew 7:7-8 begins with a command for prayer. The reason for prayer follows the need for discernment in judging people righteously.

*“But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways”* (James 1:5-8).

There is a clear triple-command and triple-promise parallelism in these two verses. The instructions by Jesus in verse seven to ask, seek and knock are imperatives in present tense. We are commanded to continue to ask, seek and knock.

After the triplet imperatives we observe the three promises as future passive verbs. The significance lies in that the prayers will be fulfilled not from ourselves but are done for us. This describes the work of God in answering prayers apart from our human effort. While we may act in an instrumental way, God is the true source of the answer to prayer and He receives the praise for any blessing.

There is a progression in these three commands:

1. Ask. This is the simple petition to God for our requests. That God is the object of the request is seen from Matthew 7:11, *“If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!”*

2. Seek. To seek is to give attention to and prioritize. It is a deliberate pursuit. It involves an expenditure of energy toward a desire. But seeking appears to give expression to an action subsequent to the request, a petition followed by an active undertaking to fulfill the need. *“But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you”* (Matthew 6:33). We must seek spiritual things.

3. Knock. Knocking obviously gives the imagery of arriving at a door. In the context of prayer, in Luke 18:1 Jesus taught His disciples that *“they ought to pray and not to lose heart.”* The petition, followed by action, leads to an obstacle that blocks entrance. In the Luke 18:2-8, we find the parable of Jesus that teaches perseverance in prayer

*“In a certain city there was a judge who did not fear God and did not respect man. There was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, ‘Give me legal protection from my opponent.’ For a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself, ‘Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.’” And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge said; now, will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?”*

As we see, the prayer offered in faith can accomplish much (James 5:15-16). Through faith we receive answers to prayer. *“But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways”* (James 1:6-8).

Through faith we find what we seek. *“Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart”* (Jeremiah 29:12-13). In faith our requests will be for what is the revealed will of God in the word. If what we ask is not His will, then obviously we will not receive.

And through faith we will have doors opened to us. *“He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens, says this: ‘I know your deeds. Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, because you have a little power, and have kept My word, and have not denied My name”* (Revelation 3:7-8).

### **The inspiration for prayer (7:9-11)**

The command/promise triplet is supported by two rhetorical questions to demonstrate the goodness of our Heavenly Father who provides in response to our requests. These two rhetorical questions lead to a compelling conclusion regarding the love of God.

Those who have faith will be able to trust these words of Jesus and gain inspiration for endurance in prayer.

We have seen rhetorical questions used by Jesus in this sermon earlier (Matthew 5:13, 46, 47; 6:25-27; and 7:3-4). Here the rhetorical questions compare human generosity with divine generosity. The two rhetorical questions are as follows:

1. A man who is asked by his son for a loaf of bread.
2. A man who is asked by his son for a fish.

In both cases, no father would choose to give a hungry son something useless, such as a stone, or something dangerous, such as a snake. The obvious answer is that there is no one who would treat their own son in such a way.

This compelling truth sets up the comparison of Matthew 7:11 between the goodness of evil earthly fathers and the goodness of our heavenly Father.

This conclusion includes evidence for the theological premise of total depravity. Total depravity means that the corruption of sin has extended to all of man's nature, his entire being, and because of that corruption there is nothing that man can do to merit the grace of God. The heart is deceitful (Jeremiah 17:9), the mind is darkened in understanding (Ephesians 4:18), the conscience is defiled (Hebrews 9:14), and our entire fallen nature (Romans 3:9-18) is subject to the wrath of God (Ephesians 2:3).

Yet in spite of mankind's evil nature, fathers give good gifts to their children who ask them. Therefore, an argument exists from the lesser to the greater: A good God's generosity will exceed the generosity of evil men. This serves to encourage prayerfulness, since an appreciation for God's goodness will motivate our requests as it brings confidence in the willingness of our heavenly Father to answer our prayers.

These words build upon Jesus' teaching on prayer earlier in the Sermon on the Mount. Our prayer will be rewarded (Matthew 6:4). God does not desire many words or meaningless repetition in order to answer prayer (Matthew 6:8). God knows our needs before we ask Him (Matthew 6:32). Jesus tells us to pray for eternal needs (Matthew 6:10), as well as our daily needs (Matthew 6:11), and of course for our spiritual needs (Matthew 6:12-13).

All of Christ's teaching regarding prayer requires our conviction that our heavenly Father desires to give what is good to those who ask Him. This faith in God's goodness is

fundamental to answered prayer. *“And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him”* (Hebrews 11:6).

### **The importance of others (7:12)**

Matthew 7:12 is one of the most well-known verses in the Bible, often referred to as “The Golden Rule.” This principle is not unique to Christianity. It is found in some form in most religions.

In the Hebrew Talmud, Rabbi Hillel is quoted as saying, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow-man. This is the entire Law, all the rest is commentary.” The apocryphal Book of Tobit, “That which you hate, do to no man” (Tobit 4:15). This has been called “the silver rule” for it only prohibits negative actions, rather than commanding positive ones.

The golden rule is given as a conclusion, as seen in the word “therefore” and it is encompassing, as seen in the phrase “in everything.” The common view is that this is the conclusion to all of the teaching of Jesus back to Matthew 5:21. Certainly this statement of Jesus is inherently beyond the immediate context since it fulfills the Law and the Prophets. Everything includes all the Law and the Prophets addressed, as well as Jesus’ corrections regarding the misunderstandings of the Law and the Prophets in chapter 5.

Yet the immediate context is compelling for it illuminates the placement of Jesus’ teaching on prayer in Matthew 7:7-11. As stated earlier, the need for prayer involved how to respond to those who practiced unrighteous judgment and how to judge righteously. Matthew 7:1-5 references people who are unrighteously judging and Matthew 7:6 speaks to how to treat the unrighteous. Prayer for wise application is essential in exercising obedience to our Lord.

In order to treat others as we would like to be treated, we must first appreciate how God treats people (Matthew 7:11). Since our Father in heaven gives what is good, He is the holy example for us to follow. *“Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect”* (Matthew 5:48).

If we are to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect, we must treat people as God would treat people. From the context of Matthew 5:46-47, this would mean to go beyond loving those people who love us. It also includes loving those who are practicing unrighteous judgment (Matthew 7:1-5) and who are trampling the word of

God under their feet and attacking those who bring the word to them (Matthew 7:6). However, in practicing such love, it is essential that we love as our Lord loves, not how we love.

The fundamental difficulty in practicing love according to the perfect standard of our heavenly Father is that our understanding of His love is immature. Nevertheless, we must love in spite of our weaknesses and confusion. This explains the importance of Matthew 7:12.

Our challenge to love in the perfect way our Lord would love is due to our sinfulness and our lack of full understanding of each situation. While our sin nature affects our mind, leading to failure to grasp proper love, it also affects our will. Matthew 7:12 addresses our will. If we are willingly seeking to treat others the way we desire to be treated, we will be fulfilling the Law and the Prophets from our heart.

With respect to the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, the New Testament restates Matthew 7:12 numerous times:

*"The second is like it, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22:39-40; cf. Mark 12:30-31; Luke 10:27).*

*"He who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law" (Romans 13:8).*

*"For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.'" (Galatians 5:14).*

*"If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF,' you are doing well" (James 2:8).*

Doing to others as we would have them do to us is the essence of the will of God. It is seen in the Old Testament, *"You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD"* (Leviticus 19:18). Instead of the multitude of specific commandments, the application of the principle of the golden rule will guide us into righteousness in our personal behavior. In this sense, Matthew 7:12 summarizes the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

This verse therefore introduces a fundamental paradigm shift in the practice of godly living. Rather than the focus on statues and ordinances that bring either blessing or cursing (e.g. Deuteronomy 28), the emphasis becomes the attitude of our heart in love. Those who seek to erect obligatory religious practices are returning God's people to a yoke that our forefathers were unable to bear (cf. Acts 15:10; Hebrews 8:13).

The application of *"treat people the same way you want them to treat you"* is dependent upon how the person themselves would wish to be treated. People, and cultures, have various norms of how they perceive how they wish to be treated. While everyone desires to be treated kindly, some perceive kindness toward them differently than others may see it.

For example, some people desire direct conversations while others desire to avoid them. Certain cultures are more straightforward or blunt, while other cultures view politeness as eschewing such directness. Another example might be timeliness, with different people or cultures viewing adherence to time more loosely than others.

Thus it is difficult to evaluate when another person is violating the golden rule. The Lord gave this to us for our internal motivation rather than to return back to an external moral code that could lead to the very prohibition that Christ gave against unrighteous judgment in Matthew 7:1-5. If our heart's desire is to serve the needs of others rather than using them to serve us, we are walking in righteousness. The remainder is the never-ending need for wisdom on how to serve each person that we relate with in service of Christ.

*"Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others"* (Phillipians 2:3-4).

## **Conclusion**

The commandment to pray by asking, seeking and knocking is rewarded by God when we ask in faith and we ask in accordance with His will. The Scripture guides us in how to pray according to His will. What we know of God's character is that He is good and desires to give good gifts to His children who ask Him. He is far more able and loving than any earthly father, fully able to bless us when we ask.

This truth of God's goodness is the foundation for how we must treat others. We fulfill the will of God by treating others as we would like to be treated. Our heavenly Father is

our example for how we ought to treat others. If they ask for a loaf of bread, we ought not give them a stone. We must serve them according to their needs, rather than placing burdens on them as the Pharisees did with the Jewish people in the era of the New Testament.

When we treat others as we would wish to be treated, we will fulfill the Law of Christ, which is to love our neighbor as ourselves. This is the essence of loving God for if we are not loving our brothers and sisters, then we are not loving God.

*"If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also" (1 John 4:20-21).*

This stark dichotomy will be the focus of the remainder of the Sermon on the Mount as we will see a series of contrasts between the destiny of those in the kingdom of heaven and those destined for eternal destruction.