

The Way of Life

Matthew 7:7-20 NRS "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ⁹ Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? ¹⁰ Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? ¹¹ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

¹² "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

¹³ "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. ¹⁴ For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

¹⁵ "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will know them by their fruits.

The Way of Life

Prayer - "Everyone who asks will receive." At first glance, taken out of context, these verses appear to say we can get anything we want if we pray for it with intensity, with strong faith, and persistently. That's what could be called the "ka-ching" theory of prayer. Put your faith in the slot, keep pulling the handle, and before long, three cherries will line up, and God will drop the jackpot in your lap. We can hear these verses as revealing the formula for how we can manipulate God to do our will. Sounds rather backwards when we put it that way, doesn't it? Even so, we'd really like to just read, "Ask, and it will be given to you,"

The Bible has some significant examples that indicate that prayer doesn't work like that. The apostle Paul was plagued by what he referred to as a thorn in the flesh. Paul was, to say the least, a fervent, dedicated, energetic disciple of our Lord. But three times he prayed for his thorn in the flesh to be removed and the answer to his sincere prayers was a clear "No." (2 Cor. 12:8-9)

Jesus prayed desperately in the Garden of Gethsemane, sweating in anguish, and **he** didn't get what **he** wanted. Incidentally, one of the problems with the painting that hangs out in the hallway is that it is a travesty to the scriptures. It shows Jesus in the Garden, but the calm serenity portrayed in that painting nowhere matches the intensity of the anguish that scripture declares so clearly. That painting is a sentimental decoration, but it doesn't proclaim the truth.

When we read this passage in context, the true meaning becomes clear. For almost three chapters now, Jesus has been telling us what is good and righteous. Things like, forgive people who have wronged us. Give up anger and retaliation. Don't hate. Don't lust. These are terribly difficult commandments, some would even say, impossible. Jesus said, "Ask, seek, and knock." Asking, seeking, and knocking are three Jewish expressions for prayer. You would ask of God, seek God's will, and knock on the doors of mercy. Pray for help. The difficult commands in the Sermon on the Mount are the good way to live. Pray, and God will give you these good things. When we take the terrifying demands of the Sermon on the Mount seriously, we must take even more seriously God's readiness to help us in fulfilling them. Reverend Samuel Shoemaker was one of the founding influences of Alcoholics Anonymous. He said, "Prayer may not change things for *you*, but it for sure *changes* you for things."

The point of prayer isn't to inform God of new information or to persuade God of the right course of action. Instead, it's an expression of our relationship to God as dependent children who recognize that we don't have ultimate and complete control over our lives. Don't be timid when you pray. Ask. Seek. Knock. God is like a wise and loving parent who will give good gifts to those who ask in prayer. Jesus says, ". . .

how much more will your Father in heaven give good things!” Jesus reminds us that God is so much more than us: more giving, more forgiving, and more loving.

We don’t have to make our prayers eloquent or pretty. We can just let our words and our feelings tumble out, because God hears beneath our words, sees our deepest needs – and knows how to give good gifts. Jesus urges us to pray like a child curled up in a parent’s lap, pouring out our dreams, wishes, needs, and fears.

The Golden Rule - The Golden Rule isn’t a term that you find in scripture. It’s the name that we gave this teaching back in the 1700s. Twenty years before Christ, Rabbi Hillel stated the concept in its negative form. He said, “What you hate, don’t do to another. That’s the law in a nutshell; everything else is commentary.”

The Golden Rule is such a famous teaching and we usually hear it quoted by itself. Treat others in the manner that you wish to be treated. That can turn it into “You get what you give,” and it becomes a recipe for selfish benefit. Invite them to dinner, so that they’ll invite you to their annual party where you can make important contacts. Give her a big gift because you want her to give you those season tickets. If you want to be invited to wild parties you must give wild parties. But in the original Greek of today’s text, the teaching begins with the word “therefore.” It isn’t to be understood in isolation. Instead, it is to be heard as part of the sermon that comes before it. It isn’t a formula for getting what you want. Jesus states the Golden Rule in the positive rather than the negative, perhaps to emphasize that there is more here than just avoiding sin. The essence of righteousness is purposefully, constructively, doing good. It’s a matter of what we ought to wish for, a matter of what we would wish for if we were in their shoes. “The focus is on doing for others, not on what one gets in return.”¹ We’re to discern the loving thing to do rather than waiting to respond to the actions of someone else.

The Golden Rule is a summary of all of the ethical teachings of Jesus, a summary of his interpretation of the law and the teachings of the prophets. It’s the essence of doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. The basis of the Golden Rule isn’t self-interest, but rather the boundless grace of God, whose magnanimity we are called to imitate. “This is God’s world, and his children [are called to] exhibit the same outgoing loving-kindness which their heavenly Father shows toward them.”²

Narrow and Wide - If we take this passage out of context then we can hear that the narrow gate is about correct theology, about believing the right things. But set in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, we see that this is about what we do, how we walk humbly with God.

Why is it called narrow and hard? Think about the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. For example, loving your enemies certainly narrows your options – and it’s very hard to do. We are to discern God’s will – and only God’s will – and that can be difficult and it certainly limits our choices.

The wide way is painted with a broad brush. The wide way says that women are emotional, have lesser mental capacity, and they should humbly accept the authority and superiority of men. That wide way resisted the vote for women. It resisted equal education for women. It resisted the ordination of women. It stills resists an equal place for women in some churches. It still resists complete employment opportunity and equal pay for women. The narrow way has sought justice for women. The narrow way pursues kindness rather than condescension toward women. The narrow way remembers that men and women are **both** made in God’s image.

The wide way paints with a broad brush; the narrow way discerns differences and subtleties. The wide way painted Chinese and Irish immigrants as substandard, suitable only for manual labor. The wide way painted all Russians as communists and spies. The wide way paints all Hispanics as illegal immigrants and drug dealers, all Arabs as Muslims and all Muslims as terrorists. The narrow way is less easy, less popular. The narrow way sees people, not classifications. The narrow way sees children, families, need and potential. The narrow way loves kindness more than categories.

The narrow way is a way of great effort. We understand that in other endeavors. To become a professional athlete requires long years of hard work and dedication - and only the most dedicated make it. To be a doctor requires many years and long hours before entering the profession. Isn’t it a little odd that people are willing to spend so little energy and time to become Christ-like, compared to the time and effort

they spend to be athletes or scientists – or even the price they pay to watch the athletes or purchase the scientific technologies?

False Prophets - Notice how Jesus describes false prophets. He says nothing about **what** they teach. It's all about what they **do** – how they're a bad model for ordinary Christians. The emphasis here is on proper living, not on correct belief.

"You will know them by their fruits." This is a wonderful metaphor. When I was working in audio, I would occasionally build a set of speakers for somebody in the family. I once made a pair for the most discriminating ears in the family and I worked on them long and hard. I decided that they should be solid pecan wood on the outside. When I bought the lumber from a hardwood supplier, I learned that there is no difference between hickory and pecan wood. Nobody can tell the difference. They look the same, they respond to tools the same way, they stain and finish identically. The only difference is their fruit. Pecans are very tasty and popular. Hickory nuts – not so much.

False prophets look good. They talk the talk. Their speech may be filled with phrases from scripture. They may constantly praise God and condemn evil. But it may all be skin deep. The obvious offenders are the mercenary class of evangelists, whose constant message is send more money or put more in the offering plate so that you may prosper, or you may be healed, or that souls may be saved in some far land. And all too often, the money mostly promotes the preacher and swells his or her bank account. There are the false prophets who drain the church coffers, misbehave with staff, parishioners, or children. There are false prophets who loudly condemn the very actions that they do out of sight. We all know about these because they get so much media attention when their actions are uncovered.

But there are false prophets who do even greater damage by reassuring people that believing in God is all that is expected of us, that who we are is all that we need to be, or that righteousness consists of being against specific medical procedures and specific sexual behavior.

In short, they preach that our status quo is pleasing to God and we have no need to be changed and transformed. There's little, if anything, that we need to **do**. And yet, the whole Sermon on the Mount is about what we do, not what we believe. You will know them by their fruits, Jesus said, and if the fruit is greed, moral depravity, spiritual laziness, or ignoring injustice and suffering, then that's the wrong fruit.

Good leaders are known by what they produce in themselves and in those they lead. The church can't just sound like and look like the kingdom of God, it must **act** like God's realm. Being a Christian isn't a passive verb. It isn't something you become in some instant in time. You might say "I accepted Jesus as my Lord when I was nine years old." Fine. If Jesus is our Lord, if he is the ruler of our lives, then our marching orders are located here in the Sermon on the Mount. Being a Christian is an active verb, it is a way of life lived by our Lord, taught by our Lord, and expected of **us** by our Lord. Being a Christian isn't the declaration of arrival; it's the journey on a path, a path that the early Christians called The Way. It's inaccurate to say "being a Christian." – "doing Christianity" would be more accurate. Jesus calls us to follow, to live the way of life that he led, to live the way of life that he taught. Amen.

(2Co 12:8-9 NRS Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.")

Tobit 4:15 What you hate, don't do to someone else.

¹ M. Eugene Boring, *The Gospel of Matthew, NIB, Vol. 8* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1995) p 215

² Sherman E. Johnson, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew, I.B., vol. 7* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1951) p 330