

The Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 7:7-14: Ask, seek, knock; The narrow gate

SOME OBSERVATIONS

- When the world sees a nasty person who, as a parent, gives good gifts to his child, it says, “Deep down this is a good person.” When Jesus sees a parent who gives good gifts to his child, he says, “...you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children...”
- Occasionally someone outside the church will assert that Jesus didn’t aspire to divinity. This chapter provides some nice counterexamples: Jesus refers to people prophesying in his name (22); Jesus refers to people addressing him as “Lord” and not rebuking them for it (21); salvation and eternal life depend on *Jesus’* response to a person in the afterlife (23).
- Many (most?) commentators agree with Stott¹ that the golden rule of 7:12 “is found in a similar—but always negative—form elsewhere,” e.g. in the maxim of Confucius, “Do not to others what you would not with done to yourself” or in the OT apocrypha “Do not do to anyone what you yourself would hate” (Tobit 4:15). The positive form goes beyond sins of omission to sins of commission; as Carson² points out, “The goats in 25:31-46 would be acquitted under the negative form of the rule, but not under the form attributed to Jesus.” Green’s³ enthusiastic statement that Mt 7:12 “is without parallel in the teachings of the world,” may be qualified by noting with Keener⁴ that it not only occurs in Lev 19:18 (though in a sea of thou-shalt-nots), but *similar* positive forms are found in a few extra-Biblical sources as well, such as Seneca’s “let us so give as we would wish to receive” (*Ben.* 2.1.1)⁵. So Alan Kirk writes, “The comparative achievement of the rule seems to be its universality, itself a function of the high level of abstraction in its formulation, not the opening up of moral territory not covered to some extent explicitly or by implication by other maxims.”⁶

ASK, SEEK, KNOCK

1. Keener writes,

This pericope emphasizes some important lessons: First, Jesus promises his disciples extraordinary power with God, like that of Elijah of old. In this case, the Gospel narratives and other ‘charismatic’ sayings (e.g. Mk 9:23; 11:22-25; Jn 14:13-14; 15:7; 16:23-27; cf. Jas 1:5) demonstrate that Jesus was not speaking figuratively, but training disciples to express bold faith (cf. 6:8; 18:19; 20:20; 21:21). [245]

The passages Keener refers to are:

¹ *Christian Counter-Culture*, IVP (1978), 190.

² *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, Zondervan (1984), 187.

³ Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew*, IVP (2000), 107.

⁴ Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, Eerdmans (1999), 248.

⁵ The earliest “anticipation” of the golden rule, according to Jeffrey Wattles [*Journal of Religious Ethics* 21 (1993), 69], is found in Homer's *Odyssey*, where Calypso assures Odysseus, “I will work no secret mischief against you. No, I mean what I say; I will be as careful for you as I should be for myself in the same need.” William Phipps [*Theology Today* 39 (1982), 194] quotes Plato as saying, “Do to others as you would that they should do to you,” in the context of business ethics and referring specifically to property. According to Wattles, this doesn't represent the self-sacrificial philosophy of Jesus, since “what virtuous restraint costs him financially will be made up by the gain of his soul of goodness, a reason that may seem ‘self-interested’” (82).

⁶ “‘Love Your Enemies,’ the Golden Rule, and Ancient Reciprocity,” *JBL* 122 (2003) 667.

- Mk 9:23—Jesus responding to a father asking if Jesus was “able” to do anything to help his child: “If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes.”
- Mk 11:22-25, “Jesus answered them, ‘Have faith in God. Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.’”
- Jn 14:13-14, “I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.”
- Jn 15:7, “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”
- Jn 16:23-27, “Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete. I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures, but will tell you plainly of the Father. On that day you will ask in my name. I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God.”
- James 1:5, “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.”

Do you agree that this passage, along with the other given above, encourages boldness in prayer? Boldness in requesting *what*? How bold do your prayers get?

2. In the parable of the narrow gate (7:13-14), he is describing both a transition (the gate) and a way of life (the road): the gate to life is narrow, and the path hard, and few find it. Jesus is addressing Jews, and arguably disciples, so he is contrasting true discipleship with first-century Judaism. Is it possible that Jesus is referring specifically to his Jewish contemporaries, saying only few of them will follow him and those who do will face opposition from other Jews? Is also possible, then that we too quickly apply this to modern Christian life? What gives us the liberty to take these words out of context and apply them to 20th-century Gentile converts who haven’t once set foot inside a synagogue?
3. In the parable of the narrow gate and in its Lukan parallel (Lk 13:22-30), Jesus warns that the path to life is hard.⁷ This passage isn't unique. As we read in 1 Peter 4:15, “If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?” Or 1 Tim 4:16, “Watch both your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.”

The idea that salvation is difficult (which we work out with fear and trembling—Philip 2:12) is a central, often unspoken tenet in much of the church. Which middle-class American Christian can read of the camel and the eye of the needle in Luke 18 without feeling ill at ease?

Following Jesus is difficult. But what aspect is difficult? Belief? Forsaking money? Purity and holiness? Self-

⁷ At least, in the NRSV the road is “hard.” “Hard” doesn't literally appear in the Greek. In Matt 7:14, the road to destruction is “narrow,” Gk. *tethlimmene*, a word which is “cognate with *thlipsis* (‘tribulation’), which almost always refers to persecution” (*Expositor's Commentary*). BDAG defines *tethlimmene* as “a narrow, confined road and therefore a source of trouble or difficulty to those using it.”

denial? Not compromising under pressure or persecution? All of the above?

In the subconscious of many Christians this logic occurs:

- 1) Salvation is difficult
- 2) Following Christ requires [*insert requirement here*]
- 3) Therefore [*requirement*] must be hard

Jesus said salvation is difficult; he didn't say that all aspects of the Christian life must be difficult. Our expectation can lead any requirement in (2) and (3) to become difficult. Belief? Must be hard, or we've substituted a false, easier gospel. Not compromising? If it's not tough, we must be blending in. Forsaking money and possessions? If you've gotten used to tithing, then you are clearly not giving enough—not giving your “widow's mite.” Self denial? If you ever become comfortable you clearly are in danger of stagnating. This attitude can also affect our reading of Scripture: We read a passage and look for the interpretation which makes life hardest.⁸

- (a) What do you find hardest in the Christian life?
- (b) How much variation is there from believer to believer in what is difficult about Christian life? How about denomination to denomination?
- (c) Jesus also taught that his yoke is easy, and his burden light (Mt 11:30). Are there elements of Christian life which you choose to see as hard, which needn't be? How many of your burdens added by you, and not Christ?



Fun quote: The most enjoyable variant on the golden rule comes from the Babylonian Talmud (*Shab. 31A*): “On another occasion it happened that a certain heathen came before Shammai and said to him: ‘Make me a proselyte on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.’ Thereupon he repulsed him with a builder’s cubit which was in his hand. When he went before Hillel, he said to him: ‘What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbor, that is the whole Torah, while the rest is commentary thereof; go and learn it.’”⁹

⁸ This question is adapted from “Is Salvation Hard? (Is Grace Easy?)”, <http://theholyhuddle.blogspot.com/2011/01/is-salvation-hard-is-grace-easy.html>.

⁹ Samuel T. Lachs, *A Rabbinic Commentary on the New Testament*, KTAV Publishing House, Inc., Hoboken (1987) 144.