

Ask And It Will Be Given

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Forerunner, "Ready Answer," November-December 2007

"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it will be opened to you." —Matthew 7:7

Would achieving astounding spiritual growth delight us? For converted members of God's church, being able to "bear much fruit" to glorify God (John 15:8) would bring us a great deal of joy and satisfaction. Yet, few of us seem to be making great strides in this regard; in fact, we tend to reach a plateau in our growth and make little subsequent progress. Is it possible that we are overlooking a fundamental teaching of Jesus Christ and are thus stunting our spiritual growth?

Perhaps in looking for more complex instruction we have never seriously considered Matthew 7:7 as a key to growth, but it may contain the exhortation that we need to grow and bear fruit far beyond what we have ever imagined. Jesus simply says, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you."

We know that Jesus spoke in parables to the multitudes to prevent their understanding, yet He reveals to His disciples the meaning of His words (Matthew 13:10-11, 13). Maybe we should regard Matthew 7:7 as a kind of parable, a saying containing a meaning beyond its simple exterior. If so, we must then ask ourselves, "What exactly is Jesus telling us to ask for?"

Many—among them preachers of the "prosperity gospel"—believe that the focus of this verse is on receiving things, that is, that we will get whatever we ask for as long as we ask according to God's will. While this is a true principle, if put in terms of materialism, it misses the real point Jesus intended because He never appeals to our vanity or instructs us to satisfy human nature's selfish desires. As Herbert Armstrong often reminded us, God's way of life is the "give" way, not the "get" way. Thus, the matter is cloaked in parable-like mystery.

What to Ask For

Upon examining the context, we find Jesus giving instructions on many things, but for what does He instruct us to request for ourselves from God? Notice what He tells us to ask for in Matthew 6:11, part of what is commonly known as "The Lord's Prayer," His model prayer designed to teach us how to pray: "Give us this day our daily bread."

This is apparently the only material request in the entire model prayer; all the other requests are for spiritual aid such as forgiveness, protection, and guidance. With this in mind, is Jesus telling us to ask for physical food every day? A literal meaning is often the most likely understanding, yet the continuing context of the chapter suggests He had more spiritual matters on His mind. Just a few verses later, in Matthew 6:25-26, 31, He teaches:

Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? . .

. Therefore do not worry, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or, "What shall we wear?"

The close proximity of these instructions makes it clear that, in telling us to ask God for our daily bread, Jesus does not have physical food foremost in His mind. What, then, is this "bread" that we are to ask for? John 6:35 provides an answer: "Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.'"

The Bible uses the word *bread* to mean "that which is taken into the body and provides nourishment." Scripture presents two basic types of bread, leavened and unleavened. Leavening consistently symbolizes the corruption of sin (for instance, I Corinthians 5:8, "the leaven of malice and wickedness"). Thus, a Christian has a choice of spiritual nourishment that he can take into himself: He can choose sinless, healthful bread or sinful, corrupting bread. This latter bread comes in a range of varieties from sinful and unhealthy to evil and downright poisonous bread.

The manna with which God fed the Israelites while they journeyed through the wilderness was symbolic of Christ, the Bread of Life (John 6:49-51). The account of the giving of the manna in Exodus 16:4, 14-21, 26 shows that the Israelites had a part to play in receiving nourishment from it. They were required to rise early and gather their daily amount before the sun "became hot" and melted it away, or they would go hungry for that day—and perhaps for the next day, if it were a Preparation Day for the Sabbath.

In "the Lord's Prayer," Jesus is instructing His followers to rise early every day and ask God to send the unleavened, sinless Bread of Life to dwell in them. Without the indwelling of Christ through God's Spirit, there is no spiritual life in us (John 6:53, 55-58).

Daily Bread

Why is it important that we ask each and every day for this? It is important because God, in His concern to preserve our free-moral agency, will not enter in and live in us uninvited. God is *not* like an evil demon that will possess us and take control of our lives against our will. He wants us to choose willingly to believe and obey Him and to seek a relationship with Him.

Like a boat trying to dock against the tide, if we do not actively pursue God, then we will slowly drift away from Him (Hebrews 2:1). The cares and pulls of the world seem to distract us easily, and we lose our focus on God. If we are ignoring Him, God may soon become unsure whether we are still choosing to walk with Him. He will try to get our attention back where it should be—on Him and His righteousness—through trials or other circumstances.

Yet ultimately, in order not to override our choice in the matter, God will allow us to slip away unless we repent and actively seek Him and ask for His Spirit. Without God's Spirit in us, we are trying to live and overcome on our own. If Jesus Himself says, "I can of Myself do nothing" (John 5:30), what chance does an individual have to overcome without Christ in him?

How does God's Spirit help us to overcome? Back in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Because of their disobedience, an attitude, a spirit, of sin and rebellion entered into them and separated them from

God. That spirit is enmity against God (Romans 8:7-9). It is a poison, a spiritual disease, that contaminates each individual as he adjusts to a sin-filled world and makes the same poor choices that Adam and Eve made.

However, once God calls a person, if he allows God to humble him, then upon repentance, he is prepared for the indwelling of God's Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the antidote for the noxious, evil spirit of sin that humanity has followed since the Garden of Eden. Our carnal spirit, mimicking the attitudes of Satan, is prideful and self-serving, but God's pure and powerful Spirit can heal us and make it possible for us to keep God's laws by dissolving our proud, selfish nature. Once this process has begun, we can then begin to bear the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23).

Yet, we cannot take the indwelling of God's Spirit for granted. When David sinned with Bathsheba and conspired in the death of Uriah the Hittite, he drifted from God for several months at least, for it was not until around the time that the baby was born that the prophet Nathan shocked the king into awareness of what he had done (II Samuel 12:14-15). In his psalm of repentance, he cries, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and *renew* a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and *do not take Your Holy Spirit from me*" (Psalm 51:10-11; emphasis ours throughout). He realized that by his neglect of seeking God daily, he had been dangerously close to losing all contact with God. Thus, he asks God to renew His Spirit within him and not take it away.

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul also speaks of renewing God's Spirit in us. He writes in II Corinthians 4:16, "Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man *is being renewed day by day.*" Speaking of the "new man" again in Ephesians 4, he instructs the brethren, ". . . put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and *be renewed in the spirit of your mind*, and . . . put on the new man which was created according to God, in righteousness and true holiness" (verses 22-24).

Clearly, God wants us to be in contact with Him every day by His Spirit.

A Continual Request

Notice Ezekiel 36:25-27:

Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.

This prophecy refers to the Millennium and beyond, when Satan will be bound and thus rendered ineffective in spreading his evil attitudes. At that time, God will repair the damage—first done in the Garden of Eden and in every human heart since—by replacing man's human nature with His Spirit. He will work to change man's heart from a hard, unyielding one to a soft, humble one that will be eager to hear and obey God.

Notice that Ezekiel prophesies that God's Spirit will *cause* people to walk in His statutes and to keep His judgments. God's Spirit provides both motivation and strength to do what is good and right. We do God's work—believing, obeying, overcoming, growing, producing fruit—not by our power and abilities but by His Spirit (Zechariah 4:6). It is readily, freely, abundantly available to those who have

believed, been baptized, and have received the earnest of the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands.

But, as we have seen, that is not the end of the matter. We must continue to request God's presence in us, our daily Bread of Life, by His Spirit. We must ask, seek, and knock, constantly pursuing God, His Kingdom, and His righteousness (Matthew 6:33). If we do this, He promises to add "all these things," our daily needs.

Jesus tells His disciples just before His arrest, "I am the vine, you are the branches: He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). If we request His presence in us each day and obey Him in faith, we will, by *His* power, produce astonishing spiritual growth.