

## Is Anyone There? Asking, Seeking & Knocking

Matthew 7:7-11

Whether or not we find God often depends on what we are looking for and what we're willing to see? On April 12, 1961 Russian Cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin made the first manned flight into outer space. During his 89 minute orbit Gagarin was awed with the incredible beauty of the world as seen from space, but upon his return to the earth he commented, "I looked and looked, but I didn't see God."

On Christmas Eve, 1968 Apollo 8 moved into orbit around the moon. It marked the first time a manned craft had left earth's gravity well. This lunar orbit had given us this remarkable view of our world for the first time. Astronauts William Anders, James Lovell and Frank Borman then took turns reading from the Genesis account of Creation.

(Play Audio of Genesis Reading)

The astronauts and the cosmonaut were both looking at the same evidence, and yet saw two different things. Is God there or isn't He? One Christian philosopher declares that God is there and he is not silent, while another admits that at times God seems invisible, hidden and absent. One person prays and never sees an answer. Another person prays and finds answers everywhere.

We see a strange dichotomy in Scripture. On the one hand, God reveals Himself and makes Himself known. Yet on the other hand, he seems hide Himself and is hard to find. The Psalmist sings in Psalm 97:2, "*Clouds and thick darkness surround him.*" It seems as though God is both easy to know and hard to know at the same time.

We arrive this morning at a handful of verses in the Sermon on the Mount that goes straight to the heart of this mystery. It is both a challenging call and an amazing promise.

Matt 7:7-11

*7 "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.*

*9 "Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? 11 If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! (NIV)*

God wants to be known, but He only wants to be found by those who genuinely desire to know Him. He wants you to find Him. He wants you to know Him, but only if you really want to know Him. God reveals Himself only to those who are really looking and are willing to accept what they find. To those that only look for a god as they want him

to be, and not as He is, He will always remain elusive and mysterious. But if you really desire in your heart to know God, then He is a question that will be answered, a quest that will be fulfilled, and a door that will be opened. And therein lays both the challenge and the promise.

Let's look first at the challenging call that Jesus gives us, then we will consider the amazing promise.

### **I. Seeking God Requires Effort on Our Part.**

The challenging call here is that seeking God requires effort on our part. He wants to be found, but God also wants us to search. We must want to find Him. God does not force himself upon us. God reveals himself, but only to those who are really looking. Jesus here describes those who are really looking as those who ask, seek and knock.

These are not three unconnected terms, but they are interrelated, each one building on the one before it. All three terms describe a deepening search, each one rising in intensity and effort.

Richard Glover applies these descriptions to a child looking for his mother. If his mother is visible and in the same room, the child simply asks. If the mother is out of sight in another room, then the child seeks her with a greater earnestness. "Mommy, are you in here?" "Mommy, are you downstairs?" "Mommy, are you in the backyard." The more the child seeks, the more he desires his mother. His longing for her increases as he seeks her. If the child finds that she is inaccessible in her room or perhaps locked in the restroom, what does the child do? He knocks. He beats upon the door. His search has become quite earnest. "Mommy, I need you?" In the same way, our desire for God increases as we search for him.

God doesn't lay it all out there, revealing all without effort. Thomas Merton suggests, "If you find God with great ease, perhaps it is not God that you have found." The way these terms are written in the original Greek indicates that the asking, seeking and knocking is to be an ongoing, continuous activity in our lives. Finding God is not something that happens only once, but it is an ongoing part of a growing relationship where we get to know God more and more. You don't ask only once. You don't seek only once. You don't knock only once. You keep asking. You keep seeking. You keep knocking.

It is only through such effort and searching that we find God. We won't find God through casual interest. We won't have a relationship with Him through mild curiosity. It's like the fisherman who had long ago abandoned his relationship with God. One day while fishing a great storm blew up, and the fisherman feared for his life. He finally cried out in prayer, "O Lord, I haven't asked anything of You in 15 years, and if You help me now and bring me safely to land, I promise I won't bother You again for another 15!"

Many people give up after a few half-hearted attempts and conclude that God cannot be found.

This brings up a curious question. Why doesn't God make himself easier to be found? Why doesn't he make himself more obvious, easier to see? What we see in Scripture is that God both conceals and reveals himself at the same time.

Philip Yancey observed that, "Jesus often made it harder, not easier for people to believe." One thing Jesus did was he told truth in parables. Parables revealed truth to those who were really searching for it, who really wanted to know the truth, and would respond to it. It gave them the truth in an understandable story form.

At the same time, though, parables hid the truth from casual observers. For those who were only willing to see what they wanted to see, parables concealed the truth. For those looking only for reasons not to believe, the parables were confusing. For those who wanted to see, Jesus' teaching allowed them to see even more. For those who didn't want to see, Jesus' teaching kept them from seeing at all.

God doesn't conceal himself because he doesn't want to be found, but He does want us to truly want Him, to ask, to seek, to knock. When you search for God, what is it that you are searching for? Who is it that you really want to find? Are you willing to find God as He truly is, or do you only want to find Him just the way you want Him? When you go to God in prayer do you really want the Creator of the universe to respond, or you just looking for a heavenly Santa Clause to fulfill your wish list?

This is our challenging call- to search for God, to search for the God who is really there, not just the one we want to see. Seeking God requires effort. If you really want to find God and know Him, you're going to have to work for it. But it's worth the effort. That brings us to the second half of what Jesus teaches us here- if we're willing to search for the God who is there, Jesus gives an amazing promise.

## **II. God Rewards Those Who Earnestly Seek Him.**

The amazing promise is this- God rewards those who earnestly seek him. God may conceal himself from those who really don't care, but to the earnest searcher He makes Himself known. God wants to be found. He wants to be known. He wants you to find Him, and He wants you to know Him.

To those who ask it will be given. Those who seek will find. Those who knock will find that the door is opened to them. Asking, seeking and knocking isn't just about finding out about God, or getting prayers answered. It's about having a relationship with God.

We don't need to ask God or seek, or knock, because otherwise God wouldn't know. Do you think Jesus wants us to ask, because God needs the information? "Your heavenly

father would really like to help you, if only he knew what you needed, so make sure you tell him.” No, that’s not it at all. Our asking isn’t about what God needs. It’s about what we need. It’s about our needing to draw close to God. It’s about our desire to know him. It is about relationship.

Jesus refers to God here as our “Father in heaven.” That circles back to the Lord’s Prayer, and I told you then how revolutionary it was to address Almighty Yahweh as our Daddy in heaven. The word Jesus used for “Father” is Abba. This was an intimate term of the home and family. It was the 1<sup>st</sup> Century equivalent of “Daddy.” To address God in this way was unheard of in Jewish prayer tradition. No Jew every prayed to God and called Him, Daddy. They wouldn’t dare think of addressing God in such personal, intimate terms.

Yet Jesus did it all the time. We might think, “Well, Jesus can do that because He was the Son of God.” But Jesus teaches us that we can do the same. God is our Daddy in heaven. Asking, seeking and knocking are about building and having a relationship with him. He wants us to search for Him because we want to know Him. He is looking for a passionate love and an intent desire to know Him. And that’s a search that God promises to reward. He wants you to know Him. He wants to know you.

There is one question or difficulty with this passage that I want to deal with before we’re done this morning. Some mistakenly take Jesus’ words here as a blanket promise to give us whatever we ask in prayer. Jesus’ promise here seems to be a simple and straightforward promise to answer prayer. But there is more than meets the eye.

It’s like the farmer who felt that he had been taken by the car salesman, so when the salesman called and asked him how much it was for a cow, the farmer told him, “\$200” The car salesman thought this was amazing deal and came immediately to get the cow. The salesman was shocked by the bill:

- Basic Cow \$500.00
  - 2-Tone Exterior \$ 85.00
  - Extra Stomach \$ 175.00
  - Product Storage Compartment \$ 60.00
  - Dispensing Unit 4 Spigots \$ 100.00
  - Genuine leather Upholstery \$225.00
  - Dual Horns \$ 50.00
  - Automatic Fly Swatter \$ 65.00
  - Total \$1,160.00
- Good deal. A cow with lots of options.

Some people feel this is how prayer is. Jesus' promise here seems quite simple and straightforward, yet to many people prayer rarely seems to work this simply. There's a lot more going on behind the scene.

First, we can't interpret these verses separate from everything that surrounds them in the Sermon on the Mount. Verses 7 & 8 can only be understood along with 9, 10, and 11. The bottom line of what Jesus tells us in verse 11 is that God desires to give us good gifts. That means when we ask God for something or seek him for something that is good he will give it. But he doesn't give whatever we want just because we ask for it. Jesus uses human parents as an illustration. We'll give our kids good things when they ask for them, but we don't give them bad things. You could also turn Jesus' example the other way. We don't give our children bad things if they ask for them.

Now you might object, saying, "Yeah, but I ask God for good things, but he doesn't always give them. There are a number of reasons why God may not answer our prayers. Already in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus has said that there are things that can keep our prayers from being answered. For instance, we saw in the Lord's prayer that we must be merciful and forgiving to others, if we want to ask God to forgive us. Jesus also said in 6:5-8 that if we only pray to be noticed by others, that our prayers won't be answered.

The other thing is that God's definition of what's "good" is different and better than our definition. We might think we're asking for something that's good, but our understanding is very limited. God sees all, understands all. He sees how everything is interconnected. He foresees the future and knows how things will work out in the very long run, so He knows much more than us what is truly "good" for us. The thing that seems good to us in the moment, God knows in his infinite wisdom isn't really good for us at all.

Prayer was never intended to be a blank check for Christians to get whatever they want. 1 John 5:14 makes it clear that our prayers must be in accordance with God's will. "*This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.*" Jesus promise here is that God will reward the heart that is earnestly seeking God, not the one looking to win the heavenly lottery.

This does not diminish Jesus' promise here though. This is still an amazing promise. When we are searching for the right thing, when we are asking for the right thing, God will answer. God will respond. God will reward those who earnestly seek him. God will reward you, if you earnestly seek Him.

Some years ago a young man approached the foreman of a logging crew and asked for a job. "That depends," replied the foreman. "Let's see you fell this tree." The young man

stepped forward and skillfully felled a great tree. Impressed, the foreman exclaimed, "Start Monday!"

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday rolled by, and Thursday afternoon the foreman approached the young man and said, "You can pick up your paycheck on the way out today."

Startled, he replied, "I thought you paid on Friday." "Normally we do," answered the foreman, "but we're letting you go today because you've fallen behind. Our daily charts show that you've dropped from first place on Monday to last on Wednesday."

"But I'm a hard worker," the young man objected. "I arrive first, leave last, and even have worked through my coffee breaks!"

The foreman, sensing the boy's integrity thought for a minute and then asked, "Have you been sharpening your ax?"

The young man replied, "I've been working too hard to take the time."

How about you? Have you been too busy, too hard at work to sharpen your ax?

Prayer is the hone that gives you that sharp edge. Without it, the more work you do, the duller you'll get.