

A CURIOUS KINGDOM
GOOD POSTURE
Matthew 7:7-12
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It is great to be back with you preaching again today! One of the blessings of my Sabbatical was the opportunity to worship at some of the many great churches in our area over the course of the Summer. I didn't realize it at the time, but my sermon prep for today's message began nearly two months ago when I attended The Meeting House Dillsburg campus on a Sunday in late June and had the opportunity to hear Dave Downey preach. A number of you probably know Dave. He worked at Messiah University. He and his wife, Emily, attended McBIC and later in 2014 were part of the team that launched our daughter church, MCC. Several years ago Dave and Emily moved to Minneapolis so Dave could serve on staff at a church there and then just three months ago the Downeys returned to our area as Dave joined The Meeting House staff.

Dave preached on the text I'm preaching on today and as I listened to his sermon it occurred to me that Matthew 7:7-12 might be the passage I would preach on when I returned from Sabbatical—I wasn't certain of that because my next preaching assignment wasn't in the forefront of my thinking while I was on Sabbatical. Dave did a great job preaching, but there was an aspect of his sermon I've been mulling over for the past 6-7 weeks. When I returned to the office in August and tuned into our preaching schedule, I realized that I would indeed be preaching on the same passage Dave did.

Before we look more closely at this passage, I want to talk about Bible study. Many of us are familiar with the 3 most important words in real estate, right? LOCATION. LOCATION. LOCATION. In a similar vein, do you know what the 3 most important word in studying the Bible are? CONTEXT. CONTEXT. CONTEXT. As long as the Bible has existed, God's word has been twisted and misquoted and taken out of context to support everything from the Crusades, to slavery, to the mistreatment of women, to Hitler and the Nazi's genocide against Jewish people. Those examples are extreme, but the Bible is also misused in smaller ways every day. When our family was on vacation this summer I saw a mug with the following statement printed on it: "I

can do all things through a verse taken out of context.” Most of us have probably heard people pluck a Scripture out of context and apply it in a way that makes us think, *“I’m pretty sure that’s not what that verse means.”* That’s not to say we can’t isolate verses from the Psalms or Gospels or elsewhere that speak to our day-to-day circumstances, but we need to recognize those words often fit in a larger context.

Reading and studying Scripture in context doesn’t just apply to misinterpreting God’s Word. At times context provides us with added depth of insight and new layers of truth. And that’s what I initially missed when I heard Dave Downey preach his sermon on Matthew chapter 7 verses 7-12 earlier this summer. After listening to his sermon I left kind of scratching my head and thinking, *“I’m not sure I get how all Dave was saying fits together.”*

I encourage you to turn to Matthew chapter 7 verses 7-12 and follow along as I read this familiar passage.

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. “Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? 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! So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

I’ve always viewed these verses as speaking specifically about prayer and the goodness of God, and they do. In fact, the picture of God we’re given here is one of the classic representations of Him in the New Testament—the loving father who wants to bless his children. But what I never noticed was the connection between verse 12 and the rest of the passage. In verse 12 we read what’s known as The Golden Rule: *“In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.”* And that verse is prefaced with the connecting word *“so,”* which alerts us that it’s closely linked to the words that come before it.

I’ve titled today’s sermon, *“Good Posture.”* When I refer to good posture, I’m not talking about sitting up straight or walking with your stomach in and your shoulders out, and I won’t be reading from Emily Post’s book on etiquette and manners. The posture I’m referring to is how we position ourselves in relation to God and to others. Let’s start with our posture before God.

How do we approach our Heavenly Father with what is on our hearts? Jesus simply tells us, *“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.”* And He goes on to say, *“Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? 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!”* The words in those verses presuppose several things that are important for us to consider as we think about the nature of prayer. **First, they speak to the goodness of our Heavenly Father.** We can ask, seek and knock with confidence, because our Heavenly Father loves us and longs to bless those who ask of Him, just as a good father wants to fulfill the desires of his child. Many of us struggle with prayer as a concept, because we doubt the goodness and love of the One we’re praying to. When we embrace the unconditional love God the Father, Jesus his Son and the Holy Spirit have for us, it can’t help but transform our prayer lives.

Secondly, based on the nature and character of our Heavenly Father, these verses from Matthew chapter 7 emphasize the posture or stance we take with God in prayer. *Ask, seek and knock* are noticeably different than *demand, hope and barge in*. Prayer isn’t about trying to twist God’s arm or manipulate Him or negotiate with Him to do something He doesn’t really want to do. No, as Jesus’ brother, James tells us in the letter named after him, *“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights.”* (James 1:17) Based on the nature of his love for us, we can approach God with joy, with confidence and with hope. The author of Hebrews puts it this way, *“Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”* Like a child with a loving father or mother, our interaction with God in prayer is meant to be a dialogue, not just a monologue where we run through our list of wants like a child on Santa Claus’s lap at Christmas. In prayer we’re sharing with God what’s on our hearts and we’re allowing Him to respond to us—giving us more of his heart and aligning our heart more with his. The good posture God desires from us in prayer isn’t about kneeling or laying prostrate or standing; it’s the positioning of our hearts in submission to Him and his will.

Let me give you a personal example. The past year has been hard on churches in many ways. Most if not all churches have seen long-time members and attenders transition to other churches. Those transitions are hard on everyone, but as a pastor who loves and cares for people and builds relationships with them, that can be especially difficult. Mid way through my Sabbatical I found myself praying for people I know who left McBIC—asking that God would move their hearts to return to our church, but after praying this way for a while I sensed God asking me to make a shift in my prayer from praying that people I care about and have been in relationship with for many years will return, to praying God’s best for their lives and their spiritual growth. As I pondered what God was directing me toward, I realized this was a shift from praying like I know what’s best and telling God to move people in accordance with my will, to submitting people and my desires to God and allowing Him to work his best in their lives, in my life and in the life of our church. Do you see the difference? As I reflected on this change in my prayer posture, I recognized that this wasn’t an isolated occurrence for me. I frequently, though unwittingly, pray, *“My Father who is in heaven, hallowed be your name. My kingdom come, my will be done on earth, as I hope your will is in heaven.”* You don’t have to raise your hand, but is there anyone else here who identifies with that prayer? Human tendency is often to use prayer to try and control God and others, but the posture God desires from us is one of submitting ourselves and our desires to God.

And the third insight I see in these verses is the need for persistence in prayer. Asking, seeking and knocking aren’t activities that we do quickly and then immediately receive what we’ve asked for and move on to something else. The posture God calls us to in prayer is one of ongoing asking, seeking and knocking. I pray the Lord’s Prayer nearly every day, because seeing God’s kingdom come to earth as it is in heaven won’t ever be fully accomplished until Jesus returns for his Church. Similarly, the process of us aligning our heart with God’s heart, submitting to his will, having him mold and transform us and seeing Him work his purposes in our lives isn’t accomplished in a moment. It’s ongoing work. Jesus calls us to pray with persistence.

As I’ve spent some time focused on verses 7-11 I hope you haven’t forgotten about verse 12: *“So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up*

the Law and the Prophets.” How does this sentence connect to the previous 5 verses about prayer? This is where context comes into play. And for some of these thoughts I’m indebted to Pastor Dave Downey and to theologian and author, Dallas Willard. (Dave should thank me for mentioning him in the same sentence with Dallas Willard. 😊)

Jesus’ focus all through The Sermon on the Mount has been vertical and horizontal. He’s constantly speaking on the dual tracks of our relationship with God and our relationship with others that He highlighted when in response to the question, “*What’s the greatest commandment?*” He responded, “*The first command is love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and the second is like it—love others as you love yourself.*” In tying his words about prayer—ask, seek and knock—to the golden rule—“*Do to others what you would have them do to you*”—Jesus highlights that good posture isn’t confined to our relationship with God. It’s also important in our relationships with others. **Just as we’re called to embrace the posture of asking, seeking and knocking with God, in which we submit our desires and our wants and our will to Him, we’re also called to embrace a submissive posture in our interaction with others.**

Yes, you heard me correctly. I did use the “S word” twice. Submission is not a popular word in our culture or in the church. Submission is hard for us to accept because it’s the polar opposite to another word we all like a lot—a word Pastor Evan ended last week’s sermon with when he was sharing with us about judging from verses 1-5 of Matthew chapter 7. Can anyone guess what word I’m talking about? I’ll give you a hint, it begins with a C. That’s right. CONTROL. Submission cuts at the core of our built-in need to control situations and people.

I’ve lived for over 5 decades, but I’m still learning a lot about myself, about life and about people. I’m learning that my urge to control situations and other people kicks in when I personally feel out of control. And that response to seek to control God and others when we feel out of control is true for all of us. When we’re unsettled, afraid, insecure, uncertain, frustrated and a bunch of other emotions, our natural response is to seek to control our circumstances, the people around us and ultimately, God. Think back with me over the past year. I know all of us have been fine, because we’re all mature Christians, but think about all those people out there who aren’t here this morning. That’s a joke—this impacts all of us. The

past year and a ½ have been full of unsettledness, fear, insecurity, uncertainty and frustration. If you haven't experienced those at least a little and seen them in others, you must have been living under a large, sound-proof rock. As I take inventory of my own actions and emotions, as I observe people I interact with and as I see and hear people across our nation, I see a lot of us seeking to control our circumstances and other people as a response to our own unsettledness, insecurity, fear, uncertainty and frustration.

Sometimes when we walk through difficulty God seems distant, absent or indifferent. He's none of those things. He's given us timeless advice through his Word and the ever-resent counsel of the Holy Spirit who lives inside of us as followers of Jesus. And in today's passage of Scripture Jesus emphasizes the importance of good posture—in our relationship with God and in our relationships with other people. As we embrace submission to Him and to others and resist our tendency to try and control Him and others, we'll experience the abundant life Jesus promises us throughout his Word. As we quiet our hearts and sing to God during our time of response, I invite you to ask the Holy Spirit to speak to your heart. Ask Him to show you if there are any areas where He wants you to allow Him to correct your posture. Perhaps you could use a posture correction in your relationship with Him—a fresh understanding of his goodness and a need to submit your desires to Him and his purposes. Or maybe the Holy Spirit is putting his finger on your posture toward others—your tendency to try and control people in response to your fears or insecurities. In contrast to trying to control others, our Heavenly Father calls us to submit ourselves and our desires to Him—trusting Him to work out his purposes in us and in the lives of others.