

Ask Like You Mean It
Based on Matthew 7:7-11
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When I was pregnant with my now almost nine-year-old sons, because of my advanced age, I had an ultrasound early on. It was routine, everything looked fine—we brought home the picture of one little baby in there, because that’s all anyone saw. Then I had a very minor problem so they did a second ultrasound. Routine, fine, take your one growing baby and go home. The minor problem recurred, so they brought me in for a third ultrasound. I was at this point maybe three months pregnant, and we had a boy’s name and a girl’s name all picked out. I go for third ultrasound, and the doctor is looking at the screen and says, “Did they mention the possibility of twins?” Oh, sure, I thought, possibility—there’s always a possibility! It took me a minute to register that the guy was telling me, lady, you got two babies in there. Once the light dawned and I’m just about thinking—huh?—and I look at my husband and he’s got this HUGE grin on his face. And when we caught our breath, one of us asked the doctor, how come they didn’t see two babies the first two ultrasounds? And the doctor says—you don’t look, you don’t see. He said it two or three times, a little surprised himself--You don’t look, you don’t see.

Now that ten years have passed and I’ve just about gotten over the shock of that moment...it occurs to me that that sentence of the doctor’s is something Jesus might have said—you don’t look, you don’t see. In fact, Jesus said something very similar—seek and you will find. That is, if you don’t look for something, then you’re pretty clearly not going to find it, are you? If, like the doctor who did the first two ultrasounds, you go looking for one baby, then one baby is all you’re going to find. This is a life lesson, folks. If a trained professional can miss a whole other live human being in this kind of situation, what else in life are we all capable of not seeing, only because we’re not expecting it to be there? What other blessings are hanging around just at the edges our vision, just waiting for us to turn our heads or pan the camera a little to the right or left, and then that blessing is going to hit and wham, trust me, your life will never be the same.

Ask, Jesus says, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. [8] For every one who asks receives, and everyone who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.

If you don’t ask, it ain’t gonna happen. But asking takes guts. You have to risk getting shot down, you have to risk looking stupid, you have to risk feeling like a fool. But if you don’t ask, it ain’t gonna happen.

The church on Sproul Road that I pass on my way here always has a lively sign. Last week it was: “God answers prayer—yes, no, or wait.” We don’t always get the answer we want for our prayers, but there always is an answer.

Which reminds me of a birthday card I got once from a good friend. On the outside it said, I prayed that God would send me a friend who was dignified and respectable, demure and ladylike, and when I met you, God answered my prayer. Then on the inside it said, “the answer was no.” Sometimes the answer is no. After all, we don’t control God with our prayers, as though God were our puppet. We make our desires known to God and God hears, but God has plans of his own.

Jesus tells us Ask God for what you want; look for what you need, knock on the door you want to be open—and let God take care of the rest. We don’t have to be shy or worried about what we ask of God. God is not like the genies in the cartoons—you know the ones who grant you technically what you ask for, but it turns out not to be at all what you wanted. Like you wish for some time off and then you get fired from your job, so you can have all the time off you want—that’s not how God operates. Jesus says, even you, if your kid asks you for a fish, you don’t give him a stone. God is not worse than you, where wishes are concerned. God is not like the legal system, in which anything you say can and will be used against you. God isn’t interested in tricking us or laughing at us. God wants us to have what we need—that’s not always what we want.

But God wants to keep in touch with us, which means we should ask God for what we want. Even if what we want is a parking space close to the grocery store, or for the basement waterproofing not to be too expensive. Yeah, it’s small, in the grand scheme of things. But it’s where we are, it’s what we want. We should widen our hearts by praying for other people, certainly. We should exercise our compassion by praying for people we don’t know, for people we might not even like. But we also have to be honest about our own daily concerns and pray to God for ourselves as well.

I’ve seen couples come back from a terrible place simply because they finally admitted to themselves and to one another that they wanted to make the relationship work. Once you say it out loud—I don’t want to lose you; I think we can make it work—I want it us to get better—that’s a powerful statement. It says something about the importance of the relationship in your life. And acknowledging that importance can make all the difference in the world. God can certainly give you things you never knew you wanted. But knowing what you want makes finding it a whole lot easier.

Someone once asked the writer C. S. Lewis, who wrote the *Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, if he believed that God answered prayer. He said, my praying doesn’t change God. My praying changes *me*. Asking God for what we want, for what we think we need, puts us in touch with God, and it puts us in touch with our own wants and needs. It gives us a new perspective on what’s really important, and where the focus of our daily efforts should be. We might begin our list of requests with the prayer that the basement waterproofing bill not be too high. But once we pray that, we’re bound to think, wait, surely there are other things we want for this church, more important things, more basic things. The surface prayers lead us deeper, until we begin asking God to deepen our commitment to the work God has given us as a church, to help us to share our faith with our neighbors in word and deed, to grant us new life so that those who are not here, those

who have never yet entered this sanctuary, could find us and in finding us that they could find the gospel in their lives.

That would be some of my prayers. You have your own list. I encourage you to make a list, on paper. The promise is that if we ask, we'll receive, if we seek, we will find. What then, should we ask for? What exactly are we looking for? If we could expect anything to happen, through God's answer to our prayers, what would we pray for? Make the list now, or make it this week at home, or while you're sitting at a red light, to use Pat Chase's method. But do it on paper, because I think it makes you think it through a little more. And share it with the rest of us. Your prayers will make me pray more thoughtfully, more deeply, so that we lead one another into a richer life of prayer.

Ask and you shall receive, Jesus says. If we pray, the more we pray, the more attention we give to our prayers, the more God works with us as we pray. As we pray, our imagination opens up, our energy builds, and our priorities resituate themselves, get back in their proper order. The more we pray, the more ready we are to do our mission as a church. But we have to pray in hope, we have to pray hard, and we have to pray faithfully. We have to pray until our prayers help us to see what it is we really want, and then pray for that. And we have to pray believing what Jesus tells us, without embarrassment, with courage. God can make things happen through prayer. If we ask we will receive, if we seek we will find—it's not a fairy tale. It's a promise and it's for real.