**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**MATTHEW-045. OUR KNOCKING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you."*

*Matthew 7:7*

In the letter to the church at Laodicea, we read, Behold, I stand at the door and knock. The image is there employed to set forth the tenderness and patience of the exalted Christ, who condescends to sue for entrance into every human heart, and comes in with His hands full of blessing. Now, it is very striking, I think, that the same symbol is employed in this text in reference to our duty. There is such a thing as our knocking at some door for entrance and blessing. What is that knocking?

The answer which is popularly given, I suppose, is that all these three injunctions in our text, Ask--seek--knock, are but diverse aspects of the one exhortation to prayerfulness. And that may, perhaps, exhaust their meaning; but I am rather disposed to think that it is possible to trace a difference and a climax in them. To ask is obviously to apply to a person who can give, and that is prayer. To seek is not, as I think, quite the same thing, but rather expresses the idea of effort, the personal effort which ought to accompany and will accompany all real prayer. And to knock possibly adds to the conception of prayer and of effort, the idea, as common to both of them, of a certain persistency and continuity born of earnestness. So that we have here, as I think, a threefold statement of the conditions under which certain great blessings are given, and a threefold exhortation as to our Christian duty.

**I. In considering these words I would first inquire to whom such exhortations are rightly addressed.**

Now, it is to be remembered that these words occur in that great discourse of our Lord's which is called the Sermon on the Mount. And for the right understanding of that great embodiment of Christian morality, and of its relations to the whole body of Christian truth, it is, I think, very needful to remember that the Sermon on the Mount is addressed to Christ's disciples, that it is the promulgation of the laws of the kingdom by the King for His subjects; that it presupposes discipleship and entrance into the kingdom, and has not a word to say about the method of entrance. So that, though very many of its exhortations are but the republication in nobler form of the common laws of morality which are binding upon all men, and may be addressed to all men, the form in which they appear in that Sermon, the connection in which they stand, the height to which they are elevated, and the motives by which they are enforced, all limit their application to men who are truly followers and disciples of Jesus Christ. And this consideration especially bears on these words of our text.

The first exhortation which Christianity addresses to a man is not ask. The first duty that a man has to discharge in regard to Christ and His grace, and the revelation that is in Him, is neither to seek nor to knock, but it is to take and to open. Christ knocks first, and when He knocks we should say, Come in, Thou blessed of the Lord.

To bid a man pray, when he should be exhorted to believe, is to darken the clearness of the divine counsel, and to narrow the fulness of the divine grace. God does not wait to be asked for His mercy and His pardon. Like the dew on the grass, He tarrieth not for man, nor waiteth for the sons of men. Before we call, He answers; and to say to people, Pray! Seek! Knock! when the one thing to say is Take the gifts that God sent you before you asked for them, is folly, and has often led to a course of painful and profitless struggling, which was all unnecessary and wide of the mark. It is like telling a man to pray for rain when the reservoirs at his side are full, and every flower is bending its chalice, charged with the blessing. It is needless to tell a man to seek for the treasure that is lying there at his side, and to which he has only to turn his eyes and stretch out his hands. It is folly to exhort a man to beat at a door that is standing wide open. The door of God's grace is thus wide open, and the treasure of God's mercy has come down, and the rain of God's forgiving love has dropped upon all of us, and made the wilderness to rejoice.

And so my message to some of you, dear brethren, is to say that you have nothing whatever to do, primarily, with this text. You have neither to ask, nor to seek, nor to knock, but to listen to Him, whose gentle hand knocks at your hearts, and to open the door and let Him come in with His grace and mercy.

**II. And now, in the next place, let me ask you to consider in what region of life these promises are true.**

They sound at first as if they were dead in the teeth of the facts of life. Is there any region of experience in which to ask is to receive, to seek is to find, and in which every door flies open at our touch? If there be, it is not in the ordinary work-a-day world in which you and I live, where we all have to put up with a great many bitter disappointments and refused requests, where we have all searched long and sorely for some things that we have not found, and the search has aged and saddened us.

It seems to be perfectly certain that the distinct purpose which our Lord here has in view, is to assert that the law of His Kingdom is the direct opposite of the law of earthly life, and that the sad discrepancy between desire and possession, between wish and fact, is done away with for His followers. Be it unto thee even as thou wilt, is the charter of His Kingdom.

Now, dear brethren, it does not want much wisdom to know that that would be a very questionable blessing indeed, if it were taken to apply to the outward circumstances of our lives. There are a good many people, in all ages, and there are some people in this day, who set themselves up for very lofty and spiritual Christians who have made deep discoveries as to the power of prayer, and who seem to understand by it just exactly this, that if a man will only pray for what he wishes instead of working for it, he will get what he wishes. And I make bold to say that all forms of so-called higher experience which involve anything like that thought are, instead of being an exaltation, a degradation, of the very idea of Christian prayer. For the meaning of prayer is not that I shall force my will upon God, but that I shall bend my will to His.

There is one region, and one only, in which it is true, absolutely, unconditionally, without limitation, and always, that what we ask we get, what we seek we find, and that the door at which we knock shall be opened unto us; and that is not the region of outward, questionable, and changeful good.

Why, the very context of these words shows us that. It dwells upon the discrimination of an earthly father in answering his child's requests; and says: he knows how to give good gifts, and so will your heavenly Father. And it takes an illustration which we may extend in that same direction when it says, If a child ask a loaf, will the father give him a stone? or if he ask for a fish, will he give him a serpent? We may turn the question and say: If the child ask for a serpent because he fancies that it is a fish, will his father give him that? Or if he cast his eye upon a thing which he imagines to be a loaf when it is only a stone, will his father let him break his teeth upon that? Surely no! He knows how to give good gifts, and an essential condition of that divine knowledge of how to give good gifts is the knowledge of how to refuse mistaken and foolish wishes.

So let us be thankful that His divine providence does not spoil His children, and make them, as all spoiled children are, a curse and a misery to themselves and to everybody round about them; but He disciplines them by a gracious No as well as by a frank, glad Yes, and often refuses the petition and grants the deeper-lying meaning of the same.

Therefore, I say that the region in which this great and liberal charter of entire response to our desires has force is simply and only the spiritual region in which the highest good is. You may grow as Christian men just as fast and just as far as you choose. A fuller knowledge of God's truth, a more entire conformity to Christ's pattern, a deeper communion with God--they are all possible for every one of us in any measure to which we choose to set our expectations, and to shape our desires and our actions. Open thy mouth wide and I will fill it. The stretch of the jaws determines the size of the portion that is put into them; and He Himself who is the only real limit of His gifts, in His endless fulness, always imparts to you and me just as much of Himself as we like and wish to take. Ye are not straitened in Me, ye are straitened in yourselves.

And oh! brethren, what a solemn light such thoughts as that throw on the low attainments of our average Christianity! So many of us, like Gideon's fleece, dry in the midst of the dew that comes down from heaven! So many of us in the midst of the blessed sunshine of His grace, standing like deep gorges on a mountain in cold shadow! How much you have lying at hand; how little of it you take for your own!

Suppose one of those old Spanish explorers in the sixteenth century had been led into some of those rich Mexican treasure-houses, where all round him were massive bars of gold and gleaming diamonds and precious stones, and had come out from the abundance with sixpence-worth in His palm, when he might have loaded himself with ingots of pure and priceless metal. That is what some of you do, when Jesus Christ puts the key of His storehouse in your hands and says to you, Go in and help yourselves, You stop as soon as you are within the threshold. You do little more than take some insignificant corner nibbled off the great solid mass of riches that might belong to you, and bear that away. The only conclusion is that you do not care much about His wealth. Dear brethren, you professing Christian people that are listening to me, if life is scant in your veins, if your faith is, as it is with many of you, all but dead, if your Christian character is very little better than the character of the people round you, if your religion does not give you any happiness, nor do other people much good, if your love is so cold that it has almost expired, and your hopes dim, there is no creature in heaven or earth or hell that is to blame for it but yourselves. Ye have not because ye ask not; ye ask and have not because ye ask amiss.

**III. And that brings me to the last question, namely, on what conditions these promises depend.**

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened. I said at the beginning of these remarks that I traced a difference between these three commands, and I take that difference for granted now as the basis of the few words I have to say. The first condition is--desires presented to Him who can grant them. To ask implies the will of a person that will hear and respond and has the power to bestow. That Person is God in Christ. Go and ask Him. We all know that prayer is essential, and so I do not need to dwell upon it; go and ask Him, and you will get what you need.

Do you ever pray, you professing Christian people? I do not mean with your mouths, but with your hearts; do you ever pray to be made less worldly? Do you ever wish to be so? Do you ever really desire that your love of this present should be diminished? Have you any appetite for righteousness? Does it seem to you to be a good thing that you should have less pleasure in the present and more joys in the future? Would you like to be a devouter Christian than you are? I very much question it about many of you. I am not hitting at individuals, but I am speaking about the average type of professing Christians in this generation.

If you desire it you will ask it. Is there any place in any of your rooms where there is a little bit of carpet worn white by your knees? Or do you pray when you are half asleep at night, and before you are well awake in the morning, and scramble through a prayer as the necessary preliminary to going to the work that really interests you, the work of your trade or business? Ask, and ye shall receive.

The second condition is effort. Seek, and ye shall find. There are a great many things in this world that cannot be given to a wish. There are a great many things in the Kingdom of Grace that Jesus Christ cannot give to a mere wish. There must be my own personal effort if I am to secure that which I desire. That is the reason why so many prayers seem to go unanswered. Think of the thousands of supplications that will go up in churches and chapels to-day for spiritual blessings. How comes it that such an enormous proportion of these prayers will never be answered at all? Well, if a man stand at the butts and shoot his arrow at a target, and does not care enough for its fate to stand there long enough to see whether it hits the bull's eye, the probability is that it will never reach its aim. And if men pray, and pray, and pray, in public, and then come out of their churches and chapels and not only forget all about their prayers but never expect an answer to them, and do nothing in their lives in accordance therewith, is there any wonder that they are not answered? Men repeat the Lord's Prayer every morning, and ask God day by day lead us not into temptation, and then go out into daily life, and are willing to fling themselves into temptation, and go through the very thick of the fire of it, if there is a ten pound note on the other side of the flame. And men ask God that He will help them to grow in grace and Christian character, and seldom do a single thing that they know will promote that growth. All such prayer is vain and unresponded to. With prayer there must go effort.

And then, lastly, the third condition is continuity or persistence. Knock, and it shall be opened unto you, Then there is such a thing as a delay in these answers that you have been speaking about, you say. No! there is no delay, but there is such a thing as the beginning of a long task; and therefore there is such a thing as the necessity for persistent and continuous perseverance even in the offering of the desires, which to express is to have satisfied; and in putting forth of the efforts in which to seek is to find. 'Tis a lifelong task ere the lump be leavened. Eternal life is a gift, but the building of a Christian character is the result of patient, continuous, well-directed efforts to the appropriation and employment of the gift that we have received. Forty-and-six years was this temple in building, they said, and it was not finished then. It will take more than forty-and-six years to build up in my poor heart, full of rubbish and of evil, a temple to the Holy Ghost.

I need not insist upon the virtue of perseverance; that is a commonplace written on the head of all copybooks, but let me remind you that in the Christian life, as much as in any other, that virtue is needful, and unless a man is content to do as Abraham Lincoln said, Keep pegging away at the duties of Christian life with continual effort, there is no promise and no possibility that that man shall grow in grace.

Now, two last words: one is, we want nothing more for the largest and most blessed possession of the true riches and eternal joys of the kingdom than the application to our Christian life of the very same qualities, virtues, excellences, which we need for the successful prosecution of our daily business. Dear brethren, draw for yourselves the contrast between the eagerness with which you pursue that, and the tepidity with which you pursue this. You know that effort and perseverance are wanted there, and you do not grudge them; they are wanted just as much here. Do you put them forth? Some of you are all fire in the one place, and are all frost in the other. You Christian men and women, give the kingdom as much as you give the world, and you will be strong and growing Christians; but if you will not, do not wonder that you are so feeble as you are.

And the last remark I make is--this great symbol of my text which is used in reference to our Lord's condescending beseechings for the entrance into our hearts, and is also used, as we have seen, in reference to our own continuity of prayerful effort, is used in another and very solemn application, in words of His Many will seek to enter in, and shall not be able, when once the Master of the house is risen up, and hath shut to the door; and will begin to stand without and to knock at the door, saying, Lord! Lord! open to us; and He--He who said Knock, and it shall be opened--He shall answer and say to you, I know you not whence ye are. That you may escape that repulse, oh my friend! do you open your heart now to the knocking Christ, and then, then, and not till then, Ask! that you may be filled with the treasures of His love, seek! that you may find the rich provision He has laid up for us all, knock! that door after door in the many mansions of the Father's House may be opened unto you; until at last an entrance is ministered abundantly into the everlasting kingdom, and you go in with the King to the eternal feast.