

*Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord Jesus Christ:
A Series of Expositions*

Volume 1

by
John Brown, D. D.

Exposition IV
"The Sermon on the Mount"

Part VI, § 3

"With Regard to Prayer as the Means of Obtaining Blessings"

"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!" (Matthew 7:7-11)

The object of our Lord in that beautiful paragraph which follows is, I apprehend, to show his hearers how the righteousness (without which a man cannot be a subject [citizen] of the Messiah's kingdom) -- the righteousness so far superior to that taught by the Scribes and exemplified by the Pharisees -- was to be obtained. If an obedience so spiritual and so extensive be necessary in all who would enter into the kingdom of God, can any of the family of frail and depraved man ever become its citizens? *"Who is sufficient for these things?"* How shall conformity be obtained to that law of the Messiah which forbids an opprobrious word, a malignant wish, and impure desire, a revengeful thought; which requires a devotion so rational, so spiritual, so unostentatious; which demands the entire surrender of the whole man; obedience the most explicit, submission the most profound?

To these questions, which must naturally have arisen in the minds of our Lord's hearers, the answer is to be found in the words before us: *"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!"*

In order to *do* good things (things in conformity to the laws of the Messiah), we must *obtain* good things, that is, (as it is explained in our Lord's discourse on the same subject, recorded in the eleventh chapter of Luke), we must receive "the Holy Spirit" -- the enlightening, enlivening, guiding, strengthening, comforting influences of the Holy Holy Spirit -- from our heavenly Father. And if we would obtain these good gifts, which are absolutely necessary to the right discharge of

our duty as Christians, we must seek them by frequent, fervent, persevering prayer. And if we do thus seek them, we shall assuredly find them; and in them we shall find the effectual means of being all that the law of the kingdom of God requires us to be, of doing all that the law of the kingdom of God requires us to do. Such, I apprehend, is the general design and meaning of this very interesting passage.

What lies at the foundation of the whole train of thought is the principle that the Holy Spirit (that divine influence which in the economy of salvation is always represented as exerted on the mind by the Holy Spirit, the divine person who along with the Father and the Son exists in the unity of the Godhead), that this divine influence is absolutely necessary in order to man's yielding obedience to the law of the kingdom of God, and exemplifying that righteousness which exceeds the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees.

Just views on this subject are of the last [ultimate] importance. Man labors under no such inability to obey the spiritual and exceeding broad law of the kingdom of heaven as can lay any foundation for excusing him from obedience, or for vindicating, or apologizing for his disobedience. No physical faculties different from or superior to those possessed by men in their present state are at all requisite in order to that obedience which the law of the new economy requires. Its first requisition is faith in Christ, or a belief of the testimony which God has given us concerning his Son. To believe this testimony, no other faculties are necessary than to believe any other testimony. The testimony is a plain statement which any man possessed of reason may understand, and [is] a statement accompanied by such evidence that any man who makes a right use of his reason must believe.

And all the other requisitions of the law of Christ are equally reasonable as this primary and fundamental one. There is not one of them that man is unable to comply with if he were but disposed to comply with it. Examine carefully all the particular injunctions of the law of the kingdom contained in the preceding part of this discourse on the Mount and say if there be one of them that a man can reasonably refuse to obey on the ground that it is physically impossible -- that is, on the ground on which the lame man might justly refuse to obey a command to run a race, or the blind man to read a book, or the dumb [mute] man to make an oration. The law of the kingdom is a just law. It requires of men nothing that is impossible, nothing that should be difficult, nothing but what is practicable, nothing but what ought to be easy.

But while this is truth (and not only truth but most important truth), which ought to be affirmed constantly as that which alone affords firm footing for establishing in the conscience a charge of guilt against the man who neglects or refuses to yield obedience to this law, yet it is not less certainly true (and it is of equal importance that this should be distinctly stated) that man left to himself never will yield obedience to the law of the kingdom, never will be what he ought to be, never will do what he ought to do. Human nature as it now exists, left to the operation of its own propensities and impulses as called forth by the objects and events of the present world, is so utterly indisposed to that mode of thinking and feeling and acting prescribed in the law of the kingdom . . . that it will never be conformed to that law. There is nothing to prevent any man to whom the claims of the new dispensation and its author are presented from complying with these claims but his own depravity, his own carnal mind, his own wicked heart. But that depravity, that carnal mind, that wicked heart will, if not counteracted and overborne by an opposite influence, most certainly prevent him from complying with these claims.

It is this depravity -- this depravity alone -- which renders such an influence as we are speaking

of necessary; and it does render such an influence absolutely necessary. To the question, "Can man do any, can man do all, of the things which our Lord here enumerates as included in the righteousness of the kingdom?" The true answer is, "He can." Who, what hinders him? To the question, "Will man, left to himself, do all or any of these things in the manner in which they are required to be done?" The answer is, "No, he will not." *"For his carnal mind is enmity against God." "His depraved heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked."* This spiritual moral weakness or inability is man's calamity, but it is also his fault. It is guilt as well as misery. It thus affords no shield from the fearful denunciations of righteous vengeance for willful transgression. But it does render us absolutely dependent on divine influence in order to our obtaining that righteousness without which no man can enter into the kingdom of heaven; that *"holiness, without which no man can see the Lord."*

To yield obedience to these commandments, all right and reasonable as they are, we must receive "good things," "good gifts," "the Holy Spirit" from our Father who is in heaven. And this is one of the great characteristic excellences of the new economy, that it is *"the ministration of the Spirit"* to men. It makes known to us *"the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus."* If it includes in it by far the clearest and the most extensive revelation of the Divine will as to what men should be and do, it also includes in it the revelation of the efficient means of making them what they should be and enabling them to do what they should do.

The atoning sacrifice of Christ was intended to open a channel through which this influence might find its way to man in a manner consistent with the holiness of the Divine character, the honor of the Divine law, the stability of the Divine administration. *"Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law"* by becoming a curse in our room [place], *"that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith,"* that is, the promised Spirit by believing. And while the atonement of Christ thus opens up a way for the communication of that divine influence which is necessary to induce man in his present state to yield true, acceptable obedience to the law of Christ, it [also] forms a part of the new economy [in] that the communication of this influence is usually made in answer to prayer.

From its very nature as *divine* influence, it can be obtained only from God; and there is an obvious propriety in the arrangement that he who needs this influence should ask it of Him who has it, and who is always far more ready to bestow it than we are ever desirous of receiving it. Hence, says our Lord (to those who . . . might be disposed to say, "How shall we work this work of God?"), Your heavenly Father will give good things; he will give the Holy Spirit to them who ask him. *"Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him that knocks it shall be opened."* If you would be citizens of the kingdom of heaven, you must have the righteousness of the kingdom. If you would have the righteousness of the kingdom, you must have the Holy Spirit. If you would have the Holy Spirit, you must ask him from your Father in heaven. And if you ask him from your Father who is in heaven, you shall most assuredly obtain him.

In order to your thus asking this Holy Spirit, whose influence is at once absolutely necessary and abundantly sufficient to your obtaining the righteousness of the kingdom, do you not see most clearly that a faith of the truth with regard to the fatherly character of God is essentially requisite? A belief that he is rich in mercy, ready to forgive? That he is *"in Christ reconciling the world to himself"* -- his Father and our Father, his God and our God? Who has *not spared his own Son but delivered him up for us all, and who with him will assuredly give us all good things* if we will but give him credit for the kindness which is in his heart and which he has proved to

be there; and show this by asking him, nothing doubting, for the blessings which he has promised to bestow? There cannot be acceptable prayer for divine influence, nor indeed for any blessing, where this faith of the truth respecting the fatherly character of God is wanting [lacking].

But then why should it be wanting in any of us? Has not God given us most satisfactory evidence that he is our Father -- our loving, forgiving Father -- after all our most unnatural and wicked behavior? And why then should any of us not say "Abba Father"?

The first communication of divine influence is not in answer to our prayers, but in answer to the prayers of him whom the Father hears always. The first communication of divine influence is not to faith and the prayer of faith. It produces faith and leads to the prayer of faith. But in the economy of grace the established order is (and it is plainly founded on the reason of things, on what is true and right) that further communications of divine influence are granted in answer to believing prayer; are communicated to him who, feeling his want [need], comes to Him who alone can supply it.

The words "*ask, and ye shall receive; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you,*" require little explication. Three different words are employed to designate prayer -- ask, seek, knock. And three different corresponding words are employed to describe the answer of prayer: "ye shall receive," "ye shall find," "it shall be opened." This triple representation obviously teaches us the high importance of the sentiments here taught, which are these: that the divine influence necessary in order to our yielding obedience to the law of Christ is not to be expected without prayer, and that by prayer this influence will most certainly be obtained.

There is something like a climax in the phraseology. *Seek* seems stronger than *ask*, and *knock* than *seek*. It is probable that our Lord means thus to intimate, that to secure those aids of the Holy Spirit which are absolutely necessary to the formation of the Christian character and the performance of Christian duty, our prayers must be frequent, fervent, persevering. We must be instant in prayer; we must continue to be instant in prayer; we must pray and not faint.

The injunction to frequent, fervent, persevering prayer for the good gifts of the Holy Spirit -- which are at once absolutely necessary and completely sufficient to enable us to yield obedience to the law of the new economy -- is enforced by the declaration, "*For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it shall be opened.*"

These works may be considered as a statement of the general truth, that asking is the natural means to be employed if we would receive; seeking, if we would find; knocking, if we would have the door opened. "In religion, use the means you would in ordinary life. If you wished for a favor from your father, would you not ask it? If you needed something you had lost, would you not seek for it? If you wished the door opened, would you not knock at it? Use your common sense in religion as in everything else; and if you do, you will abound in prayer."¹ This is fitted to meet a common but absurd idea, that prayer is a meritorious exercise, a work by the performance of which we are to propitiate God and secure his favor, instead of being the natural means of expressing our wants and having them supplied. Prayer, or rather saying prayers, with very many who not unfrequently engage in it, is not at all the means of obtaining what they feel they need and wish to obtain. They have often no feeling that they need, no wish to obtain, the things asked for in the words they utter. They are merely doing something which they have been taught to believe is right, pleasing to God, the neglect of which would interfere with their good opinion of

¹ Brown does not give the source of this quotation.

themselves and the performance of which keeps them on good terms with themselves, and makes their conscience comparatively easy as to their religious duties. What monstrous absurdity, what fearful impiety is this! And yet this is the religion of a large body of men who pass, not only with others but with themselves, for being religious!

Or, the words may be considered as an express promise that such prayers (prayers to our Father in heaven for good gifts, for the Holy Spirit) shall assuredly be answered. As if he had said, "Rest assured, that if you use the appropriate means for obtaining the Holy Spirit, you shall not employ them in vain. He that asks shall receive; he that seeks shall find; he that knocks shall have it opened to him."

From this passage, and a number of similar passages in the New Testament, ill understood, some have deduced the absurd principle that we may have anything we please from God for the asking, if we but ask it in faith. And asking in faith, in their estimation, is just working ourselves up to the persuasion that we shall obtain what we ask. The passage before us teaches us no such absurdity. It teaches us that if we ask of God (as our Father in heaven) [for] "good things," that is, "the Holy Spirit," to enable us to do his will, we shall not be disappointed. The other passages often quoted in support of such irrational expectations are equally ill fitted to serve that purpose. Whatsoever we ask "in faith" we are sure to obtain sooner or later. But we can ask nothing "in faith" without a reference to some Divine promise in which the blessing we solicit has been pledged to us. To pray in faith is not to pray expecting that God will give us whatever we may wish or ask, but that he will give us whatever he has promised us. The duty of praying in faith rests on the plain principle, that *"if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us."*

To encourage his hearers to apply to God for these good gifts of that Holy Spirit . . . our Lord makes an appeal to their paternal feelings; and reasons from what an earthly father, with all his imperfections and faults, would or would not do, to what might be expected from our all perfect and all beneficent Father in heaven: *"Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!"*

Parental affection, by the wise and kind arrangement of God, is one of the most powerful of all the active principles of the human mind. It is absolutely monstrous for a father not to supply the wants [needs] of his children when he has it in his power. It would be more monstrous still were he not merely to refuse to comply with their entreaties for what is beneficial and necessary for them, but to give them in its place what is useless or noxious. The man who could act in this way would justly be considered as a disgrace to the species. Even though in many respects evil, though hard-hearted and close-handed in reference to others, fathers are commonly kind to their children. Their being fathers, in ordinary cases, secures kind treatment of their children.

Now, says our Lord, what may not be expected from the infinitely excellent and amiable Divinity towards those in reference to whom he is pleased to take the appellation [name] of Father? In knowledge, in wisdom, in kindness, in wealth, in liberality, our heavenly Father infinitely surpasses all earthly fathers; and therefore we may ask him, with the absolute certainty of obtaining our request, that he would give us "good things," "good gifts," "the Holy Spirit." He knows that the Holy Spirit, in his saving influences, is as absolutely necessary for our souls as food is for our bodies; and he never will, he never can, without denying his fatherly character, refuse this to those who ask him.

This is most conclusive reasoning, most persuasive exhortation, well calculated to shame into annihilation the jealousies of guilt, the fears of unbelief. [Fuller writes,] "And is it possible that, after all this, we should ever feel reluctant to draw near to God? Oh, what must be that alienation of heart which can make light of such a privilege; that guilt and shame which make it seem almost a duty to stand aloof; and that distrust of God which gives to our approach before him an appearance of presumption!"

It is plain, however, that this is an argument which can have no effect on a mind which does not believe the truth with regard to the fatherly character of God. So long as men look on God merely as a righteously-displeased Judge, they cannot come to him in the full assurance of faith. They must believe his own declaration, that he is "*The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty*" (Exod. 34:6,7); who has "*set forth*" his Son "*as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus*" (Rom. 3:25,26); "*God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them . . . For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us*" (1 Cor. 5:19-21).

As I have already remarked, it is strange, after all that God has said and done, that there should be any doubt on that subject among those to whom the word of the Christian salvation has come. Has he not declared that "*He desires all men to be saved*" (1 Tim. 2:4)? Has he not sworn, "*I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked*" (Ezek. 33:11)? Has he not glorified his grace in that he "*did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all*" (Rom. 8:32)? Is he not proclaiming, "*Return, you backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings*" (Jer. 3:22)? "*Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die?*" (Ezek. 33:11). Is it not strange that after all this we should doubt whether God be our Father?

Till we believe this -- the love which God has to worthless, self-ruined man -- till we know him as "*God in Christ, reconciling the world to himself,*" our prayers cannot be the prayers of faith, and therefore cannot be acceptable. And the more clearly we perceive, the more firmly we believe this truth, the more readily shall we go to God for the supply of all our need; and the more abundant evidence shall we have in our own experience that he indeed gives liberally and upbraids not. The reason of our being so destitute of the Holy Spirit is not to be traced in any degree to the backwardness of God to confer the Holy Spirit, but entirely to our *not asking*, or to our *asking amiss* (James 4:3).

We thus arrive at the point to which, in all our illustrations of Christian doctrine and duty, we so often find ourselves brought: the necessity of the faith of the Gospel. The importance of the knowledge and belief of the truth respecting the character of God -- as rich in mercy, ready to forgive; in other words, the faith of the Gospel -- cannot be overrated. It lies at the foundation of all acceptable duty, of all true holiness, of all solid consolation, of all permanent happiness. "*Lord, show us the Father.*" "*Lord, increase our faith.*"

Exposition IV, Part VI, § 3 in volume 1 of *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord Jesus Christ: A Series of Expositions*, 2 vols., 2nd ed. (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1854). **Note:** The text has not been

modified, except that punctuation has been modernized, long paragraphs have been divided, and the NKJV has been used for the Scriptures quoted.