

God gives good gifts! Matthew 7:7-14

Setting the scene

Jesus has climbed a hill, he's sat down and begun teaching the people who have gathered around him. They're eager to hear what this wise teacher has to say. They've started to realise that here is someone really quite special. Here is a teacher who is very different to the ones they've heard before. This teacher grabs their attention, captures their interest, holds them spellbound so that when he's finished they don't actually want to leave.

As Jesus sits on this hill talking to the crowd, he covers all kinds of topics that the people might need to know related to being one of his followers. (another word we sometimes use for his followers is disciples). And although he covered these topics nearly two thousand years ago, his teaching is all about things that still matter very much to us today – for example where to look for contentment, how to care for others, what to do with powerful emotions such as anger and hate and lust, how to cope with worries for the future....the list could go on. Because although the world around us changes, deep down human beings don't change very much.

Even if you don't know much at all about the Bible I'm sure you've heard the phrase 'turn the other cheek' and have at some point said the Lord's Prayer. Well they're included too in this session of teaching which is famously called *the sermon on the mount*. It's all about how following Jesus changes us - changes the way we relate to the world around us, changes how we relate to different situations that we encounter, and changes how we relate to the people around us.

And now the bit that we've just listened in on comes towards the end of the session up the hill. Not long after that bit that we read Jesus draws the session to a close, wraps it up, comes back down from the hill and goes off into the villages around Galilee, where he heals many people.

Why this bit?

You might be thinking at the moment, why has she chosen *that* little bit to talk about today? After all there's the whole Bible to choose from! And it's a very special day for Sarah & Kev and their family, so shouldn't we be hearing about Jesus saying 'let the little children come to me' or something like that?

Well, I've chosen to look at this little bit of Jesus' teaching from the *Sermon on the mount* precisely *because* it is such a special day for Leila and Georgia and Sarah and Kev. These verses that we've heard give a little glimpse of family life. In these few verses from the Bible Jesus shows in the words he speaks that he knows *all* about parents and children. It's a timeless truth where families are concerned: He knows that children ask for things and that

parents give things! If you're a parent I reckon that at this very moment you're thinking, 'yeah, too true!' and thinking about something that your child has asked for.

Asking and giving

In her little life so far Leila will have asked for many things and Sarah & Kev will, to the best of their ability, have given her those things. And it won't be long before little Georgia is joining in too! Parents want to give good things to their children because they love them. And Jesus, in his teaching to the people on the hillside, understands that. He says 'imagine your son or daughter asked for some bread. Would you put a stone on their plate? Of course you wouldn't. They would break their teeth! You would give them the bread. And an even more extreme example – imagine your child asked for a piece of fish. Would you dump a snake on the plate? Of course you wouldn't. The child would be terrified, or in danger, or both. You would give them the fish.'

The point he's making is that parents *want* to give good things to their children. Things that will help them flourish. Certainly not things that will harm them.

Sarah and Kev are working all the time at being the best parents they can be – I know that! They're bringing Leila and Georgia up in a secure and loving family. They're teaching them rules that will keep them safe, social skills that will help them to get on with others, values that will help them grow eventually into mature adults. And part of the reason for bringing their girls here this morning for blessing and dedication is because they want them to grow up with an understanding of what it means to have faith in God. Part of the reason for coming to activities like Messy Church is that they want them to grow up knowing God's love as part of a church family.

In all kinds of ways Kev and Sarah are giving their daughters good things.

On the hillside Jesus carries on his point...' if you know how to give good things to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! In other words human parents do their best, but God is the perfect parent who is just bursting to give us, his children, good things - if only we'll ask him. As human parents want to give out of love, so does God. He's full of love for us and he's just waiting to hear from us.

Nothing harmful

Now before we all launch into a frenzy of asking – a porsche, a promotion, a lottery win, whatever.....let's just remember that as well as being loving and generous, God is the ultimate responsible parent. There are times when parents do not give their children what they have asked for because it would not be good for them. It would not be a 'good' gift. It could end up being harmful. Sarah and Kev will not have said 'yes' to everything Leila has asked for up 'til now, and they won't in the future either, because some of it could be

harmful. Parents know that because they have a wider perspective, more knowledge, greater experience of the world than the child. The same is true of God. We may ask for things that look fantastic, really attractive, but that God knows are not 'good gifts'. We may ask for things that would in fact cause us harm. And because he is the perfect parent he won't grant those requests.

Love

Kev and Sarah love their girls to bits – that's obvious – and the human relationship between parent and child gives us a tiny little glimpse of the love that God has for each one of us. In the teaching on the hillside Jesus draws, as we've already seen, on that parent analogy. But that isn't the only place where God's love is expressed. Right throughout the Bible, again and again, is the story of how much God loves his children and wants what is best for them.

But the tricky thing with children is that sometimes, especially as they get older, they go off and do their own thing. They rebel, they don't want to listen to their parents, even if deep down they know it is sound advice. They put their fingers in their ears and go 'la la la, can't hear you!'

As well as the story of God's love, the Bible tells the story too, running along-side it, of human beings going off and doing their own thing. Of turning their backs on God's ways and going 'la la la, can't hear you' and the mess that they get in as a result.

Jesus, on that hillside was speaking to a group of people who had realised that they wanted to take their fingers out of their ears and start listening again to God. They didn't want to go off their own way any more. They wanted to go God's way. A bit like the child who finally matures enough to realise their parents were talking sense after all!

And so they were following him, listening to his teaching, hanging on his every word, learning how to live with new priorities.

All this talk of love and parents and children makes me wonder where we are in this. Have we got our fingers in your ears going la la la can't hear you? Have we, have you, realised recently that it would be good to take them out and listen to God? Are we hanging on Jesus' every word? Perhaps you've never thought about it!

Well today is as good a day as any to think these things through.

The very first verse in the little bit of Bible that we read says 'ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you.' If you want to find out more about God the loving parent, if you want to find out more about this chap Jesus and his teaching as the people on the hillside did, then do these things – ask, seek, knock! In other words enquire more. Ask questions of those you know who are already followers of Jesus. Go on a course that digs deeper – 'alpha' mentioned on the notice sheet that you've

got is a good start. And pray. Praying simply means talking to God. As you talk to him ask him to help you understand more.

And keep at it!

As we've given thanks for Leila and Georgia this morning we've been reminded of the love that exists between parents and children. And we've seen a little bit of how God is a loving parent to us -his children. The song we're going to sing now begins with the line 'how deep the father's love for us, how vast beyond all measure' and it talks about the way in which God has shown his amazing love for us by sending Jesus (his son) into the world.

House Group Notes

God gives good gifts! *Matthew 7:7-14*

We're thinking about this passage towards the end of the Sermon on the Mount, in the context of a blessing and dedication service. And these few verses demonstrate that Jesus knows *all* about the dynamics of family life. He knows that children ask for things and that parents give things!

Parents want to give good things to their children because they love them. Jesus draws on that in his teaching. He says 'imagine your son or daughter asked for some bread. Would you put a stone on their plate? Of course you wouldn't. They would break their teeth! You would give them the bread. And he gives an even more extreme example of a snake instead of a piece of fish. The point he's making is that parents *want* to give good things to their children. Things that will help them flourish, certainly not things that will harm them.

On the hillside Jesus continues, *'if you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good things to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!'* In other words human parents do their best, but God is the perfect parent who is just bursting to give us, his children, good things - if only we'll ask him. As human parents want to give out of love, so does God. He's full of love for us and he's just waiting to hear from us.

But before we launch into a frenzy of asking – a porsche, a promotion, a lottery win, whatever- we need to remember that as well as being loving and generous, God is the ultimate responsible parent. There are times when parents do not give their children what they have asked for because it would not be good for them. It could end up being harmful. The same is true of God. We may ask for things that look fantastic, really attractive, but that God knows are not 'good gifts'. And because he is the perfect parent he won't grant those requests.

The human relationship between parent and child gives us a tiny glimpse of the love that God has for each one of us. Running right throughout the Bible is the story of how much God loves his children and wants what is best for them. But alongside that is the story of humanity going off and doing its own thing, like a rebellious child who knows better!

Jesus was speaking to a group of people who had realised that they wanted to listen again to God rather than going off on their own path. A bit like the child who finally matures enough to realise their parents were talking sense after all! Jesus urges the people to 'ask, seek and knock'. In other words, to keep persisting as they rediscover the God who loves with an amazing love.

For Discussion

1. Think of an example from your childhood when you had a request refused by your parents because it would be harmful. If you are a parent, think of a request from your children that you refused. How did you feel at the time? How do you feel about it now?
2. What do you think are the 'good gifts' that God wants to give us?
3. How do we cope with the knowledge that sometimes persistent prayer goes un-answered?
4. Why do you think this particular teaching comes towards the end of the Sermon on the Mount?

What can we do to help those who are 'asking, seeking and knocking'? What could we be doing better as individuals and as a church?