

4. Ask

“Ask” is the only three-letter word to which a chapter will be devoted in this series on “Little Words.” Even so, the word is important enough and distinctive enough to justify its inclusion.

Here is how this chapter is organized and developed. After an introduction calling attention to the Greek words translated “ask,” there is a section on how Jesus handled a persistent and, for some people through the centuries, perplexing question. This is followed with two relatively brief sections on “Encouragement to Ask” and “Conditions for a Favorable Answer.” The study of “ask” closes with a section on how Jesus dealt with a question or request that is very persistent although not as frequently verbalized as many other requests or questions: *What is the basis of greatness in the kingdom of God?*

The two major Greek words that are frequently translated “ask” are *aiteo* and *erotao*. There is another word, *eperotao*, closely related to or built upon *erotao*. It is practically always translated “ask.” It is predominantly a Synoptic word: eight times in Matthew, twenty-five times in Mark, and nineteen times in Luke, but only two times in John’s Gospel, nine times in Acts, and two times in the Pauline epistles. In other words, it is found more in Mark or in Luke than in the remainder of the New Testament.

In contrast to *eperotao*, *erotao* is a rather distinctively Johannine word. It appears in John’s Gospel more frequently (twenty-six times) than in all three

Synoptics (nineteen, with fourteen of these in Luke). As is true of many other Greek words, the translation of *erotao* varies considerably. However, in the main, the various words are really synonyms for “ask.”

There is at least one noticeable difference in the way that *aiteo* and *erotao* are used. The latter is usually used as a part of a general statement concerning asking rather than a specific teaching, direct or indirect, concerning ask or asking. The preceding may help to explain the fact that *aiteo* is translated “ask” or “asking” more frequently than *erotao*. For example, the former is translated “ask” or “asking” forty-seven of seventy-one, or 66 percent, of the times it is used in the New Testament. In contrast, *erotao* is translated “ask” twenty-three of the fifty-eight, or 39 percent, of the times it is used in the New Testament.

A Persistent Question

Before we seek to present some of the major direct teachings of Jesus concerning “ask” and “asking,” let us examine, to a limited degree, the answer of Jesus to one of life’s most persistent and, sometimes, perplexing questions.

You remember the incident of the blind man as recorded in John 9. The disciples asked Jesus, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2). Men and women through the centuries, before and after the days when Jesus lived among men, have sought an answer to the relation of sin and suffering. There is a tendency, even in the contemporary period, for some Christians as well as non-Christians to think that a serious physical or mental or emotional handicap or illness is in some way the result of sin by the individual or by his parents or loved ones. But Jesus revealed a different perspective. He revealed a divine purpose in the blindness of the man: “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him” (John 9:3).

You remember the rest of the incident. Jesus “spat on the ground and made clay of the spittle and anointed the man’s eyes with the clay” (John 9:6). The man followed the instructions of Jesus, and the man’s eyes were opened.

The entire chapter reveals various ways that the blindness of this man and his healing by Jesus manifested God’s works in him (John 9:3). Over and over again the experiences of Christians have proved the statement correct. God can and frequently does take human suffering and use it to be a blessing to the one who suffers, to loved ones, friends, and anyone who comes in contact with the one who suffers. In other words, the *why* question may not be answered, but the more important question, *what*, is at least potentially answered. Whether a mere potentiality or a reality will depend primarily on the one who suffers but secondarily on the reaction of the family of the one who suffers.

Of course, it should be admitted that much suffering is the result of sins of the one who suffers but also frequently results from the sin of others. There are few if any areas where the relation of sin and suffering is more clearly seen in the contemporary period than smoking and cancer. Certainly, all cancer is not caused by smoking, but the latter increases tremendously the possibility of cancer. However, it should not be overlooked that cancer can be caused by one inhaling the smoke from someone else’s smoking. It should be understood, of course, that much and possibly most cancer is not related to smoking at all. Surely in the contemporary period we do not need to mention the abuse of drugs as a factor in much suffering. Also, many teenagers who have gone astray have been terribly neglected by their parents during their formative years. In other words, many young people suffer because of the neglect of their parents.

Many parents, particularly of handicapped children, have doubtless asked the question, *Why?* Jesus in this case

recorded in John 9 did not—and we are persuaded in many contemporary situations would not—attribute the handicap to sin of the individual or of his or her parents.¹ I am sure that He would say as He did then that, whatever the handicap or illness, our Father would like to use it in such a way as to reveal His grace and goodness. In other words, our heavenly Father wants to use suffering, whatever its nature or source, to make an impact for good in those touched by the suffering.²

The main question for Christians who suffer directly or suffer because of a loved one who suffers is what they will let our heavenly Father do to and for them when suffering comes. To repeat, our main question when suffering comes should not be *why* but *what*. It is true, however, that the spirit in which we ask and answer the *why* can be a major factor in *what* we let Him do to us and through us because of our suffering or the suffering of our loved ones. The answer we give to *why* and *what* will be a good measure of our maturity in Him.

Encouragement to Ask

There are many New Testament references that should encourage us to take our questions concerning our problems and life in general to our heavenly Father. This encouragement is evident, to some degree, throughout the New Testament, but particularly in the Gospels that record the life and teachings of Jesus.

Using primarily Matthew's account, let us notice a few emphases. There is the assurance that if we ask, seek,

¹ Tom Mc, T. B. and Essie Mae Maston's first son, suffered an injury when he was born, resulting in cerebral palsy. He lived for sixty-two years unable to speak or care for himself. The Mastons cared for him, never placing him in an institution.

² Maston's book *God Speaks Through Suffering* is a fuller expression of his perspectives on suffering.

and knock, our heavenly Father will respond (Matthew 7:7-11). Even a wise human father will sometimes refuse a request. After all, Jesus prayed three times for the removal of the cup that was awaiting Him (Matt. 26:39-44). The closing words of that prayer, “Nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt” (Mark 14:36, KJV), should be true of those of us who claim to follow Him. “Nevertheless” is prayer at the highest level. We should never forget that we, God’s children, must take the initiative and ask, seek, and knock. Williams, in his translation of the New Testament, brings out the tense of the verbs in the Greek. He says, “Keep on asking,” “keep on seeking,” and “keep on knocking” (Matt. 7:7-8, WMS). The seeking and knocking imply some effort on our part. There is no evidence here or elsewhere that our heavenly Father responds to a merely casual approach or appeal. Really, we should recognize also that there are occurrences when His response to our prayer will be negative rather than positive.

Jesus compares our heavenly Father to a human father. A human father will give his son (or daughter) bread, fish, and other good things of life when asked for them. The glorious conclusion of Jesus was, “How much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him” (Matt. 7:7). The statement is the immediate background in the Sermon on the Mount to what has been referred to for many years as the “Golden Rule”: “Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them [“always treat others as you would like them to treat you,” NEB] for this is the law and the prophets” [“this is the essence of all true religion,” Phil] (Matt. 7:12).

Rather interestingly, the parallel passage in Luke does not refer to “good things” as a gift from our heavenly Father, but there Jesus says that the Father will “give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him” (Luke 11:13). Surely we will agree that the Holy Spirit is the greatest, most abidingly

significant gift that our heavenly Father can give His children. The verse preceding “The Lord’s Prayer,” or “The Model Prayer,” includes the following (Matt. 6:8): “. . . your Father knows what you need before you *ask* him.”³

A grandson was very impressed when he overheard his elderly grandfather’s prayer as the grandfather prepared for bed. The grandson was impressed with its content and with its brevity. The elderly man, an active Christian since his youth, in a very brief prayer, said: “Heavenly Father, I thank you for the sense of your presence and your blessings as I have gone through the responsibilities of the day. Give me a good night’s rest and I will see you in the morning. Good night.”

I first heard the great George W. Truett preach when as a college student I attended a Student Volunteer Convention at Des Moines, Iowa. I can still remember the outline of his simple but tremendously effective message. I heard him on many other occasions. One message that left a lasting impression on me was in chapel at Southwestern Seminary. He spoke on some words in the Model Prayer. He called particular attention to the order of the different petitions. I have never forgotten the major thrust of his message. He said that a child of God does not have the right to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread,” until he has first prayed (Matt. 6:10-11),

Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done
On earth as it is in heaven.

We cannot give much space to two or three additional references we want to mention as encouragement to ask God to bless us. There is recorded in John 11:21-27 that wonderful conversation of Jesus with Martha. It includes a

³ Italics added for emphasis.

statement to and about Jesus that is one of the greatest found anywhere in the Scriptures. Why not take the time to turn to and read prayerfully and meditatively John 11:20-27, noticing particularly verse 22: “I know that whatever you *ask* from God, God will give you.”⁴

It may be wise for us to remember, in this day when there is so much controversy regarding the place of women in our churches, that women such as Martha, her sister Mary, and other women had an important place in the life and ministry of Jesus. Some of them were last at the cross and first at the tomb of Jesus. No wonder Jesus, so far as we know, first revealed himself after this resurrection to a woman—Mary Magdalene. She at first did not recognize Him. It was when He spoke to her, calling her by her name, “Mary,” that she recognized Jesus and called him “Rabboni” [“which is Hebrew for ‘My Master,’” NEB] (John 20:16). How do you think Jesus spoke when He called her by her name? My judgment is that the tone in which He spoke, the inflection of His voice, was distinctly soft and tender.

There was the occasion when Jesus spoke to His disciples about His approaching crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. In seeking to prepare the disciples for the days immediately ahead, He said, among other things, “If you *ask* anything of the Father, he will give it to you in my name; *ask*, and you will receive, that your joy may be full” (John 16:23-24).⁵

Conditions for a Favorable Answer

There are a few situations where it may seem, on the surface, that a favorable answer is impossible. But a closer examination will reveal that the answer to the questions we ask God are in some ways and to some degree conditional. At least a favorable or positive answer is not inevitable. After

⁴ Italics added for emphasis.

⁵ Italics added for emphasis.

all, we live in a moral order, and our heavenly Father is a moral Person. This could not be true of Him if he unconditionally answered every question we asked Him, every request we made of Him.

There are some places in the life of Jesus where He more or less plainly stated some conditions for a favorable response to our questions or requests. Let us look briefly at some of these. They will be quoted and commented on in the order in which they are found in Scripture.

Matthew 18:19-20: “Again, I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they *ask*, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”⁶ Notice they were to be gathered in His “name.” Williams translates the last part of verse 20 as follows: “. . . as my disciples, I am right there with them” (WMS).

Matthew 21:22: “Whatever you *ask* in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.”⁷ Here “faith” is the condition for answered prayer. The setting for this verse was the cursing of the fig tree. For Christ the fig tree symbolized Israel’s practice of religion in that day, presenting much outward show but bearing no fruit of true relationship with God. Could the same be said of many of us: an outer veneer of the Christian faith but with no depth? For many of us there is enough truth implied to that question to make us uncomfortable.

Several conditions for answered prayer are mentioned in John’s Gospel. Meditation on the following may richly bless our lives.

John 14:13-14: “Whatever you *ask* in my name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son; if you *ask*

⁶ Italics added for emphasis.

⁷ Italics added for emphasis.

anything in my name, I will do it.”⁸ The promise is conditional—it must be in His name and that the Father may be glorified. And to ask in His name involves a great deal more than simply closing our request with “for Jesus’ sake” or some similar words.

Attention should be called to verse 12, which gives the assurance that through Christ’s absence the disciples would be enabled to do greater works than Jesus himself had done (EGT). The conversion experience is mentioned in particular.

John 15:7: In this great chapter the word “abide,” which is the subject of a chapter in this book, appears eleven times in the Revised Standard Version. Now notice verse 7: “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, *ask* whatever you will, and it shall be done for you.”⁹ A question or two will convince us, I am sure, that those conditions for an answer are not easy to fulfill. Do we fully abide in Him, and do we permit Him to fully abide in us? Do we permit Him to express himself—His will and purpose—in and through us? We know, of course, if we are children of His, that there is a sense in which He lives or abides in us. On the other hand, if we are mature, sincere children of our Father in heaven, we are deeply conscious of falling far short of what we ought to be in and for Him. In other words, there is a sense in which He abides in us if we are children of God, but, as suggested previously, the more mature we are in Him the more conscious we are of our immaturity and imperfection. Too many of us tend too much of the time to push our devotion to our Father and His will to the circumference of our lives instead of making Him and His will and purpose the controlling center of our lives. The

⁸ Italics added for emphasis.

⁹ Italics added for emphasis.

place we give to Him in our lives will largely determine His response to our questions or requests.

Typical of Williams's translation of the New Testament, he translates John 15:7 as follows: "If you remain in union with me and my words remain in you, you may *ask* whatever you please, and you shall have it" (WMS).¹⁰

Let us briefly look at some verses in the general epistles.

James 1:5-6: "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him *ask* God, who gives to all men generously and without reproaching, and it will be given him. But let him *ask* in faith, with no doubting" ¹¹ Notice again the emphasis on "faith," but also notice what we are encouraged to ask for—"wisdom." Also read verses 7 and 8.

James 4:3: "You *ask* and you do not receive, because you *ask* wrongly, to spend it on your passions."¹² You do not get what you want because you do not pray for it. Or if you do, your requests are not granted because you pray from wrong motives. You may be blessed by reading and meditating on the remaining verses in that chapter.

Let us look at two references from 1 John.

1 John 3:21-22: "Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us [that's a big if for many of us], we have confidence before God; and whatever we *ask* we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments ["practice obedience," WMS], and do the things that are pleasing in His sight" (NASB).¹³ But do we keep His commandments, and do we always do what pleases Him? We have the assurance

¹⁰ Italics added for emphasis.

¹¹ Italics added for emphasis.

¹² Italics added for emphasis.

¹³ Italics added for emphasis.

that He will grant what we *ask* only to the degree that we keep His commandments and do what pleases Him.

I John 5:14-15: These verses contain another great promise, which, like most others, either specifically states or implies a condition: “And this is the confidence which we have in him, that *if* we *ask* anything according to His will he hears us, and *if* we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him.”¹⁴ The asking has to be within His will.

The appropriate closing to these sections on encouragement and conditions for favorable response to the questions we want to ask or requests we would like to make of our God is Paul’s benediction to the first three chapters in his letter to the Ephesians: “Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly [“surpassingly more,” WMS; “immeasurably more,” NEB] than all that we *ask* or think, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever” (Ephesians 3:20-21).¹⁵

Some of the most incisive and challenging statements to be found anywhere in the New Testament are in Ephesians 4 and 5. A reading of these chapters will reveal some material that will challenge you and enrich your life. You may want to give particular attention to verses 1-3 and 11-15 in chapter 4. Notice the prominence of “walk” in chapter 5, verses 1-2, 8, 15.

The benediction and the whole epistle sound like it comes from one who has matured in his relation to his and our Risen Lord! Thank you, Brother Paul, for having written Ephesians, and thanks to those who have preserved it for us in our day!

¹⁴ Italics added for emphasis.

¹⁵ Italics added for emphasis.

Response to a Request

In the preceding sections of this chapter, we have considered how Jesus responded to a persistent and to some a perplexing question about the relation of sin and suffering (John 9:1-6). This is a question that continues to perplex many people, including some Christians. This section was followed by two sections on “Encouragement to Ask” and some of the “Conditions for a Favorable Answer” to questions that might be asked Jesus.

Now, in this closing section we want to consider how Jesus responded to another request made by two of His disciples, recorded in Matthew 20:20-28.

1. Source of the request

According to Matthew’s account (Matt. 20:20-28), the request came from the mother of James and John. Mark does not mention the mother (Mark 10:35-41). Even in Matthew, Jesus, in His response, spoke directly to the two disciples. In other words, if the mother of James and John verbalized the request, she doubtless had discussed it with her sons and may have had their approval to make the request. In addition, my view is that the mother of John and James was named Mary and that she was a sister of Mary the mother of Jesus, making John and James first cousins of Jesus.¹⁶ If that view is correct, it is possible that the other disciples’ unfavorable reaction to the request of James and John stemmed, at least to some degree, from their belief that the two brothers and their mother were taking advantage of that relation to Jesus.

¹⁶ The naming of the mother is not in these passages. Maston might have derived his view of the name from the passages describing the crucifixion and resurrection and those women present at those events (see Matt. 27:56; 28:1; Mark 15:40; 16:1; Luke 24:10; John 19:25).

2. Background for the request

In the immediate background in Matthew, Jesus had said that He was going to Jerusalem and that He would be condemned to death and would be crucified, but He ended with the triumphant note that “he will be raised on the third day” (Matt. 20:17-19). This does not sound like the background for a request for seats of power and prestige in the kingdom, which it was assumed Jesus would establish.

Is it possible that John and James were not present when Jesus announced those things? If they were present, they evidently ignored all except the fact that Jesus would be raised on the third day. Possibly they were thinking primarily about what He said as recorded in Matthew 19:28: “Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of man shall sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones’” All John and James wanted were the thrones on each side of Jesus!

3. Response of Jesus to the request

We will use Matthew in the main since the record in Matthew is somewhat fuller than Mark’s (see Mark 10:35-45). The immediate response of Jesus was, “You do not know what you are asking” (Matt. 20:22). I wonder how often this could be said of some of our requests. To reign with Him meant to suffer with Him. Immediately after Jesus had said, “You do not know what you are asking.” He asked a question that is relevant for us, His contemporary followers (Matt. 20:22): “Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?” The “cup” was used as a symbol of suffering (Isaiah 51:17-22; Jeremiah 25:15) but also of rejoicing (Psalm 23:5; 116:13). From the Christian perspective, the cross comes before the crown. That is just as true today as in the days when Jesus walked among men. Do you think that they had adequately thought through the fuller or deeper meaning of the question of Jesus when they responded (Matt. 20:22), “We are able”? Their

reply was amazing proof that their ignorance and self-confident ambition had blinded their eyes (WP). It is true that James, a relatively short time later, paid with his life for his allegiance to Jesus.

The word of Jesus to the brothers was, “You will drink of my cup,” and then He added, “but to sit on my right and my left is not mine to grant” (Matt. 20:23). Then notice what He added, “It is for those for whom it has been prepared,” which could refer to particular individuals or to individuals who had certain qualifications (Matt. 20:24). Possibly mention should be made of the fact that Jesus did not and does not condemn a desire to be great. He does emphasize over and over again and demonstrated in his own life that greatness from His and the Father’s perspective is related to and dependent upon the service rendered and not the service received. Christians who are really great give themselves in unselfish service for God and to their fellowmen. They never attempt to lord it over their fellow human beings—Christian or non-Christian. What Jesus said here about greatness is a complete reversal of popular opinion then and now (WP).

4. Reactions of the other disciples

When the ten other disciples heard about the request of John and James, “they were indignant at the two brothers” (Matt. 20:24). We do not know how they heard about the request. One of them may have actually heard the conversation. Or John and James may have shared it with a friend. Why were the other apostles indignant? Some may have thought the brothers were trying to take advantage of their kinship to Jesus, a kinship that we assume was true, or it could be that they were angry because John and James had thought first of the request or were the first to verbalize it.

5. The rejoinder of Jesus

There are no words more important on record connected with this whole incident than what Jesus said evidently to all twelve of the apostles as recorded in Matthew 20:25-28. Jesus called them to Him and contrasted the “rulers” or “great men” of the Gentiles to those who would be great in His kingdom. He pointedly stated His and the Father’s standard of greatness. There are few verses in all the Bible more important or more needed in contemporary Christianity.

That statement to John and James, to the other apostles, and to us in our day was and is: “Whoever would be great among you [notice again that Jesus did not condemn the desire for greatness] must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave,” and He added: “even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:26, 27, 28). Permit me to say again that there are few statements in all the Scriptures needed more by many if not most contemporary Christians than the message of these verses.

You may think that in this chapter we have not stayed close to the word *ask*. It should be remembered however, that some of the most serious questions by many—Christians and non-Christians—are not stated in question form. Many are stated as requests for something or for a position of prestige. This chapter on *ask* would not be complete without this request by John and James for positions of prestige and power in the kingdom that Jesus would establish. Let us never forget that greatness from the perspective of Jesus was always measured in terms of ministry or service. The really great Christian men and women are great for the service rendered and not for the service received.

Discussion Questions

1. On this verb, “ask,” and the others, read Maston’s Scripture references within their larger context. Does “ask,” for instance, change according to circumstances?
2. Should a discussion on “listen” be included with “ask”? Do we ask questions of others and wait for a response, or do we tend toward dominating a conversation?
3. With regard to Maston’s section titled “A Persistent Question,” note that Maston’s older son was born with cerebral palsy and required lifelong care. That experience shaped a great many of Maston’s presentations, oral and written. How much of contemporary culture discriminates against those with physical, mental, or emotional challenges?
4. Within this same section to which reference was made in question 3, Maston made a distinction between the questions *why* and *what*. What implications do this distinction have for your life?
5. In the section “A Persistent Question,” Maston said, “Many young people suffer because of the neglect of their parents.” If Maston were to have expounded on this subject, what do you think he might have said? How has parental neglect affected people in your life? in your own life?
6. With reference to the Model Prayer, what do the various phrases mean to you (see Matt. 6:9-13)?