

Notes on Ask, Seek, Knock

Jesus summarised his teaching on prayer saying:

Ask and it will be given to you;
seek and you will find;
knock and the door will be opened to you.
For everyone who asks receives;
the one who seeks finds;
and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

(Matt.7.7-8 = Luk.11.9-10)

Colour key: Present Imperative, Future Indicative, Present Indicative, Present Participle

To understand this, we need to see where the emphasis lies, because if we get this wrong, the meaning is changed. Take, for example, the following two sentences:

“Meaning lies in the **emphasis**.” – that is, the emphasis helps us understand.

“Meaning **lies** in the emphasis.” – that is, the wrong emphasis can deceive us.

The outcome of the grammatical details below is that the emphasis should not be on “receive... find... open” but on “ask... seek... knock”. Translating this into English gives us:

If you want to receive, ask!

If you want to find, seek!

If you want the door open, knock!

For everyone who receives has been asking,

those who find have been seeking

and those to whom the door is opened have been knocking.

By turning round the order to give the correct emphasis, the meaning has changed. It no longer implies that we can get whatever we want if we are sufficiently persistent. In terms of praying, this wrong emphasis would mean that God will give us whatever we pester him for.

When the emphasis is seen correctly, it says: you won't receive, find or open doors without first asking, seeking and knocking. In terms of praying, this means: if you want God to answer your prayer, one obvious prerequisite is that you pray to him!

This is a necessary teaching, especially when Jesus has told us that our heavenly father already knows what we need. We're not sure why, but God still wants us to pray to him.

Emphasis in Greek is determined in similar ways to English, by:

1) **Word order.** The order in which words are placed in a sentence affects their meaning. A word right at the beginning of the sentence or delayed to the end of it, when normally it might be expected in the middle, gives it greater emphasis.

In this case the word order in Greek is not unusual, so the emphasis is not being conveyed by that means.

2) **Tense.** Words in past or future tenses can gain emphasis because they are not in the default present tense. So “will be given”, “will find” and “will be opened” appear to have emphasis in these sayings.

This is especially true in English because the future tense involves adding “will”, which can convey certainty if the speaker/reader emphasises this word, for example “I **will** do it”.

But the future tense usually doesn’t imply this - it merely conveys that something isn’t in the past or present. For example “The bus will come at 6 pm.” is not (unfortunately) a certainty or a promise.

Greek readers do not suffer the confusion of the word “will”, so the future tense conveys little emphasis. Also, the default tense in Greek is not the present - it is the aorist. This is a form of past tense but often it conveys no tense. The future is a little stronger than the present, but not in this case because of the mood.

3) **Mood:** An indicative mood is stronger than a subjunctive mood which tends to convey uncertainty. Crudely speaking “I will do” (indicative future) implies that I will certainly do something, whereas “I shall do” (subjunctive future) implies that I’m likely to do it or I wish to do it but it might not happen.

This is difficult for us to appreciate because English has almost totally lost the subjunctive. We still use it in theory, because it is still correct to say “if I shall...” rather than “if I will...”, but in practice we don’t convey or hear any significant differences between these two, because we no longer use or recognise the subjunctive. If anything, the “shall” sounds stronger and more certain (i.e. the opposite of its older meaning) because it is unusual.

Since we no longer use the subjunctive, all we are left with is the implied subjunctive, which occurs whenever a sentence contain a condition, often expressed with “if”.

A similar change happened in conversational Greek (i.e. the Greek of the New Testament). Although the subjunctive still existed, it was very rarely used. There is only one instance of future subjunctive in the NT (“burn” in 1Cor.13.3) compared to 1800 instances of future indicative.

Strictly speaking, “it will be given”, “will find”, and “will be opened” should all be expressed as future subjunctives, both in Greek and English, because they are dependent on an implied condition – i.e. “ask”, “seek” and “knock”. The King James translators recognised this, and translated using the subjunctive future: “shall be given”, “shall find” and “shall be opened”. Most readers in the 17th century would have understood the nuance conveyed by these subjunctive moods, even though we can’t.

These implied subjunctives tend to give the verbs less emphasis, and throw the emphasis on the other verbs. The other verbs in this case are all in the imperative, which imparts a strong wish, or command or injunction. English doesn’t have a specific way to express the imperative, except by prefixing “must” or “should”, or ending with an explanation mark: “do it!”

This is a very strong mood which almost invariably grabs the emphasis in a sentence, especially if the alternatives are subjunctives.

How to convey this in English

In this series of phrases, the emphasis therefore lies with “Ask”, “Seek”, “Knock”. This is confirmed in the second sentence where the other set of verbs, “receive”, “find”, “open”, use a simple present tense while “Ask”, “Seek”, “Knock” are emphasised by being presented as participles – i.e. “Be asking”, “Be seeking” and “Be knocking”.

The continuous nature of a participle has given rise to the idea that it means “ask and keep on asking”, but a participle does not necessarily convey a long-term action. Someone who is “blinking” is performing a brief action, though if they are blinking continuously you’d conclude they are falling asleep. Similarly “waving”, “scratching”, “coughing” are all short term actions, which would convey a completely different concept if they were continued over a long period of time. A participle does not convey the length of an action. It asserts that it is happening now, or it simply makes the action emphatic.

The emphasis therefore clearly lies with the verbs “ask”, “seek”, “knock”, so how can this be conveyed in English? Placement of a word at the start of a sentence can sometimes give emphasis (like the word “placement” in this sentence), but this is tricky, as the emphasis can be lost unless the placement is clearly unusual. The verbs “ask”, “seek” and “find” don’t come across as emphatic when placed either at the start or end of these sentences. The best way is therefore to convey the progress of the sentence by explicitly stating the implied condition: “If... then...”, e.g. “If you want to find, you should seek”. However, this is too bland, and doesn’t convey the full force of the imperative, so it is better to say: “If you want to find, seek!”.

Translating this Greek emphasis into English therefore results in something like:

If you want to receive, ask!
If you want to find, seek!
If you want the door open, knock!
For everyone who receives has been asking,
those who find have been seeking
and those to whom the door is opened have been knocking.

The teaching in the context of Matthew

Jesus presented some potentially contradictory teachings about prayer:

- Prayer should not be lengthy for the sake of merely speaking words
 - So you should not babble like the Gentiles do (Mat.6.7)
 - He gives his disciples a brief prayer encompassing everything (Mat.6.9-13)
- God loves us and already knows what we need:
 - Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him (Mat.6.8)
 - So do not be concerned about food, clothes or homes (Mat.6.25-34)

But Jesus also wanted to teach that:

- We should pray to God in an insistent and persistent way. So he added:
 - You need to ask, seek & knock in order to receive, find or open doors (Mat.7.7-8)

In Luke, it is illustrated with the friend at midnight (Luk.11.5-8) and insistent widow

(Luk.18.1-6)

The main thrust of this group of sayings is the reminder that God wants us to pray. Few people need to be told to pray for what they want, but everyone need reminders to pray for what God wants. Jesus' brief prayer included "Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven". He instructed prayers for God's will to be done, with the implication that God's will fails to be done without prayer. If this was not the case, these words would be unnecessary babbling.

Reading with the English emphasis on "receive, find, open" teaches us that we will get what we want, find what we are looking for and gain access to our goals if we ask persistently.

But when we read the same words with the Greek emphasis on "ask, seek, knock", we learn that Jesus wanted his followers to keep asking for God's will to be done, seeking those who are lost, and knocking on those closed doors. This persistence is not in order to grow comfortable, but to grow the kingdom.

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