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ASK AND IT SHALL BE GIVEN TO YOU

We all know Matthew 7:7.

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: (Matthew 7:7)

So are you sure that you understand what this instruction actually means? Have you tried it? **Does it work for you?** What exactly was Jesus Christ telling us to do with this specific instruction? The next verse says:

For **every one that asks receives**; and he that seeks finds; and to him that knocks it shall be opened. (Matthew 7:8)

So when you asked, were you a part of "every one" as in "**every one** that asks receives"? Or did "every one" in this verse somehow exclude you? In this verse "every one" is a translation of the Greek adjective "pas", which means "**all**". So once again: **how is your asking working for you?**

Could it be that James 4:3 perhaps applies to your asking?

You ask, and receive not, because you ask amiss, that you may consume it upon your lusts. (James 4:3)

In this verse "amiss" is a translation of the Greek adverb "kakos". This adverb means "badly" and "wrongly".

So in speaking to the Church, James said: "you don't receive the things you ask for because you ask badly or wrongly". James implies that if they did not ask "wrongly or badly", **then they would receive the things they asked for**, as per Matthew 7:8. But because they were asking wrongly, therefore they did not receive what they had asked for.

With the expression "that you may consume it upon your lusts" James was addressing **the motivation behind the things they were asking for**. The next verse shows what James had in mind here, because he calls the people he is writing to "adulterers and adulteresses" (James 4:4). So James had something very specific in mind; he was addressing problems of immorality within the Church.

However, the principle of James's statement has a far wider application than just matters pertaining to morality. The principle underlying the statement James made is: you don't receive the things you ask for **because you ask selfishly**, you are asking **to get things for yourself**. We can ask wrongly in a lot more ways than just those that involve matters of morality. The principle of James 4:3 applies to any requests that are in any way selfish.

Now aren't we today just like the people to whom James wrote his letter, in that **a lot of the time we today also don't receive the things we ask for** because we are asking wrongly?

So what is actually the problem when we in God's Church ask God for something, but our requests are not answered? Let's face it, that is the case so very often, isn't it, that we keep asking for the same

things because we never seem to receive an answer?

Let's consider some examples.

EXAMPLES OF SOME THINGS PEOPLE ASK FOR

Over the years I have heard people ask God for a lot of things. Sometimes such requests appeared in print, in some or other booklet or article; at other times some such requests appeared in opening and closing prayers at church services, or even in sermon messages; and in some cases these requests were voiced in visiting and counseling situations. And with some of those requests I knew immediately that they would never be answered by God.

For example, consider various forms of the following requests:

- "Father, please give me (us) more love for the brethren."
- "Please give me more faith and more patience."
- "Father, please give me more kindness for other people."
- "Father, please give me (us) more of Your Holy Spirit."

Now these requests, and others like them, don't stand a snowball's chance in hell of ever being answered by God! All of them are forms of "asking amiss"!

Now consider various forms of the following requests:

- "Father, please give us our daily food."
- "Father, please help us to find a suitable home or job."
- "Please protect us from the dangers all around us."
- "Please help us to find favor with the people with whom we have to interact."

These are the requests, and others like them, that God will answer for His people, provided we live in faith and in integrity before God.

So are you able to identify the difference between these two groups of requests? Why would God answer the requests in the one group and not answer the requests in the other group? What is the difference?

THINGS GOD GIVES TO PEOPLE

Before Jesus Christ said "ask and it shall be given to you" in Matthew 7:7, He had already spelled out how we are to approach God the Father in prayer. Just a chapter earlier, but still in the same context,

Christ had told us how to pray (i.e. Matthew 6:9-13).

Now in that entire prayer outline there are a number of different subjects addressed. But within that context **there is only one "give us" statement!** And that one statement is "give us this day our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11). In this prayer outline there is **nothing else** that Jesus Christ told us to ask God the Father to "give to us". This is important to note!

The principle of the "give us this day our daily bread" request is that we ask God on a daily basis for **our needs for that particular day**. Our daily needs are represented symbolically by "bread".

In practice, our daily needs include things like:

- the **food** we need on a daily basis,
- suitable **housing**,
- adequate **clothing**,
- **protection** from dangers and from enemies,
- **favor** with the people that we have to deal with,
- **help** with the responsibilities we have to fulfill, **etc.**

The "ask and it shall be given" statement most certainly applies to more than our daily needs, as I will explain. But as far as "getting things" is concerned, the statement in Matthew 7:7 needs to be understood as standing on the foundation of the prayer outline Jesus Christ had presented a few verses earlier, in Matthew 6. We can confidently ask God to help us with all of our daily needs. But Matthew 7:7 is not a carte blanche statement for every possible request we might have; it assumes the premise of Matthew 6:11 ("give us this day our daily bread").

One major key regarding whether or not God will give us the things we ask for in the context of our daily needs is **our motivation** in asking. What do we want from God, and why do we want it? Is it something that we ourselves could get if we put out the necessary effort to do so? Are we wanting to get something without putting out any effort ourselves? Are we looking for an easy way to get things done?

Just what is our innermost motivation in asking God for these daily needs? Is there any aspect of selfishness in our requests to God? Some requests stem from a right motivation, and others stem from a wrong motivation. We ourselves must always be clear about what our own real motivation is, because our motivation will certainly be very clear to God (see Hebrews 4:12-13).

Now let's consider some things that amount to "asking wrongly".

THINGS THAT GOD NEVER GIVES TO ANYONE

Yes, there are things beyond our daily needs that we can ask God for, and which God will then give to us. One way to understand what those things are is to first make clear what things God will never give to anyone. Then we can look at things that we can confidently ask God for.

So what is a major category of things that God never gives to anyone?

GOD WILL NEVER GIVE ANY SPECIFIC ATTRIBUTES OF CHARACTER TO ANYONE!

To spell this out in plain language:

God will never give to anyone the attribute of love, or the attribute of meekness, or the attribute of goodness, or the attribute of faith. God will never give any of the fruits of the Holy Spirit (see Galatians 5:22-23) to anyone. God will never give anyone real godly character.

And God will most certainly never give more of His Holy Spirit to anyone in response to **a request for more of the Holy Spirit**. That is something that God will simply never do.

Requests for more of the Holy Spirit or for more of any of the fruits of the Holy Spirit display a total lack of understanding regarding the real purpose of a Christian life.

Asking God to give us more of the Holy Spirit, or to give us more love for other people, etc., would be like the servant who had received two talents from God (see Matthew 25:15) saying "can I please have three more talents so that I have just as much as my friend here to whom You have given five talents?" But God isn't about to give that servant "three more talents" until God sees what that servant will do with the two talents he has already been given.

To make this quite clear:

Why would someone ever ask God "please give me **more** of Your Holy Spirit"? Why? **The request is absurd!** Such people don't have even the foggiest ideas of just "how much" of the Holy Spirit God has already given them. And if we don't have any idea at all regarding how much we already have, how could we possibly ask God for more? What are we going to do with the extra Holy Spirit ... feel good? How can we possibly know that the amount of Holy Spirit God has already given us isn't enough to do what we would like to do or what we know we need to do?

Asking God for more of His Holy Spirit is somewhat like the son of a very rich man, who has already received millions of dollars from his father, asking his father for more money, even though that son doesn't have any idea at all just how much money his father has already deposited in the son's account. The son just asks for more as a matter of principle, without even checking whether he already has enough money for the project he has in mind.

To make this quite plain: asking God "please give me more of Your Holy Spirit" is an expression of greed!

And such a request will never be answered by God! How can we possibly assume that we somehow "need more" of God's Holy Spirit than God has already given us, in order to live the Christian life in integrity before God?

To in analogy compare God's Holy Spirit to "the talents", it doesn't matter whether God has given us five talents or two talents or just one talent. It is not the amount received that counts; what counts is how much we do with what we were given. It doesn't matter how much Holy Spirit God has given to you and to me; what matters is what we do with what we have already been given.

Let's look at that verse more closely.

And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one; **to every man according to his several ability**; and straightway took his journey. (Matthew 25:15)

The Greek text for "according to his several ability" is "kata ten idian dunamin". The Greek adjective "idios" means **"his own"**, and the Greek noun "dunamis" means **"power"**.

So here Jesus Christ said that the number of talents given to each servant is **"according to each man's own power"**! In other words, there is nothing arbitrary or haphazard about how many talents each man received. There is nothing haphazard in the amount of Holy Spirit God has already given to repentant believers. There is no bias involved in giving some people only one talent, while at the same time giving other people five talents or two talents. It is all according to what people have done.

If you and I are in the "one talent" situation, then that is **due entirely to our own actions**. And if you and I are in the "five talents" situation, then that is likewise due entirely to our own actions. The number of talents, or the quantity of Holy Spirit for that matter, that we receive from God is God's response to how thoroughly we repented when we came into God's Church, how committed we are, and how we have conducted ourselves before God since coming into God's Church. But it has nothing whatsoever to do with us asking God "please give me more of Your Holy Spirit".

We never receive anything from God when we ask God for "more" of anything.

To make this plain:

If we have received less of God's Holy Spirit than some other people in the Church have received from God, then **that is entirely the result of our own doing** and it is our own responsibility! The amount of Holy Spirit God gives to a repentant believer is always "according to each man's **own power**" (Matthew 25:15) ... that is the point Jesus Christ was making. And it has nothing to do with intellectual power or brain power.

It has to do with the depth of repentance, i.e. with the depth of the change in the way we think, and with the resoluteness of leaving Satan's ways behind, and with the strength of our commitment to God, and with the zeal in wanting to implement all of God's ways in our own lives. **These are the things that determine whether God will give us five talents or two talents or only one talent!** These are all things that are under "our own power", which means that these are all things that we ourselves are responsible for.

Now can you see **why** it is the person that has received only one talent that is the most vulnerable one? In that parable Jesus Christ assuredly wasn't picking on the one who had received the least to make an example of. It is precisely because the one talent man hadn't made more of a commitment than he absolutely needed to make in order to be eligible for receiving God's Spirit. He had repented, yes; but he had done so without the zeal and the unshakable commitment that other people bring to the table when they come to repentance. And so God had given him only one talent, the rock-bottom amount of Holy Spirit God makes available to people who do repent. Not all repentance is equal!

The one talent people are always the ones in the greatest danger of turning out to be "on stony ground" or "amongst thorns". From the get-go they are in greater danger of not enduring unto the end. And it all has to do with God giving His Spirit "to every man according to his several ability" (Matthew 25:15).

And asking God "please give me more of Your Holy Spirit" is not going to achieve anything at all.

THERE IS A WAY TO RECEIVE MORE

Yes, there is a way to receive more of God's Holy Spirit from God, but that is not by asking for more.

The Holy Spirit is dynamic and never static. When God gives His Spirit to a person, then that Holy Spirit will never slumber in that person, and **it can never lie dormant**. It can never be locked away in a safety deposit box or buried for later use. It will never stay fixed in one location. It is constantly moving because **it is the force of life**.

The old adage "use it or lose it" also applies to God's Holy Spirit. The principle "freely you have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8) also applies to the gift of God's Holy Spirit. However much of God's Holy Spirit we may have received, it is inevitable that all of it will leave us. See Ezekiel 47:1-12 for a description of how the Holy Spirit "flows out" like water. What is described in Ezekiel 47 also happens within every person that has received God's Spirit; it flows out of us, and if put to the right uses then it produces good things. But this means that it must always be replenished. Now in the process of God's Spirit leaving us we have a choice:

Either: Does it flow out of us in the form of godly conduct? Does it flow out of us because we are using it up in the way we put God's laws and God's wishes into practice in our daily lives? Are we making a positive use of God's Spirit?

Or: Does it evaporate away from us like the water in a shallow tropical lake, like the Etosha Pan in Namibia, on which the equatorial sun is mercilessly beating down, because we have not made any attempts to put God's Spirit to use in our daily lives, in our conduct and in our behavior? If we don't use it, we will surely lose it, without God replenishing it for us.

Now it is when we let God's Spirit flow out of us by us using it in our daily lives, that then it will produce the fruits of the spirit in our lives. **It is up to us** to utilize God's Spirit to produce love and joy and peace and longsuffering and gentleness and goodness and faith and meekness and temperance. See Galatians 5:22-23 again.

When the apostles before their conversion asked Jesus Christ to give them more faith (Luke 17:5), **Jesus Christ assuredly did not give them more faith!** Instead, Christ explained to them that that is not the way it works. Christ explained that if they wanted to have more faith, then they first had to do more (Luke 17:7-10). And if they really did more than they were commanded to do by God, **then they would also have more faith**. In other words, more faith in their lives would be produced by them doing more than they were commanded to do. But no way was God going to give them more faith simply because they had asked for more faith. It is all a matter of cause and effect.

When we have some money in a bank account, then we might withdraw some of that money to buy certain items. But usually we try to be cautious enough to never withdraw all of our money. Before the amount goes too low we usually try to deposit additional funds into that account. We don't want it to run dry. The thought of always still having some money in that account for emergencies gives us some comfort. We don't want to use all of the money in our account. And it is sensible for us to leave as much as possible in our account for future needs and wants.

Sometimes some people have a similar approach to the gift of the Holy Spirit. They want to get more of it; but they are not planning on spending it. They just want to have a bigger account.

God's Spirit does not work like a bank account!

The only way to receive more of God's Spirit is to use it up as fast as we receive it. And the more we use it constructively in our daily lives in our interactions with God and with other people, the more of it God will give to us. If we "give it out" in our dealings with other people, then "it shall be given unto us" by

God. And when we give it out, i.e. when we use it, that is when it will produce the fruits of the spirit. As long as we have a genuine "give attitude", God will give unto us. And we can never out-give God.

That should clarify somewhat why we should never ask God to "give" us more faith or love or compassion or more of His Holy Spirit. Rather, we should use the Holy Spirit we have already been given "to the last drop" as it were, in the way we live our lives and in how we interact with other people with whom we come into contact.

And then having more of the fruits of God's Spirit in our lives will take care of itself. And then God will assuredly also give us more of His Holy Spirit, so that in practice we never get to that "last drop" situation, because God will give us more of the Holy Spirit long before we even get close to theoretically using it all up.

THE CONTEXT OF MATTHEW 7:7

We sometimes see Matthew 7:7 taken out of context, and applied to whatever point the speaker may have in mind. But we should consider the context.

After saying that everyone who asks receives, Jesus Christ went on to say the following:

Or what man is there of you, whom **if his son ask bread**, will he give him a stone? Or **if he ask a fish**, will he give him a serpent? (Matthew 7:9-10)

The examples Jesus Christ presented involve **asking for food!** "Bread" and "a fish" were staple foods for people at that time. And obviously, the reason why a son would ask his father for bread is because the son is hungry; the son has a need for food. These examples are tied directly to Matthew 6:11 ("give us this day our daily bread").

The point is that even though we are evil, we still have a concern for our own children and help them with their daily needs. And so Christ then made the following point:

If ye then, being evil, know how to give **good gifts** unto your children, **how much more shall your Father** which is in heaven **give good things to them that ask him?** (Matthew 7:11)

There is something here that most people easily overlook. Jesus Christ said that we human beings give "good gifts" (Greek "domata agatha") to our children. The Greek noun "doma" means "a gift", and the Greek adjective "agathos" means "good". Jesus Christ said that **we give tangible things** to our children, and He was referring to food and to other necessities of life. So Christ used one word for "gifts" and another word for "good".

However, when Christ spoke about what God gives to us, then Christ did not use any word for "things". So the expression "good things" is supposed to be a translation for the one Greek word "agatha". But "good things" is not really a correct translation of the word "agatha". Christ did not use any word for "things"! Christ wasn't necessarily referring to God the Father giving us anything tangible at all.

A correct translation for the last part of Matthew 7:11 should read: "... how much more shall your Father which is in heaven **grant good** to them that ask Him?"

Yes, "granting good" can certainly include God giving us "our daily bread". But that is not really the primary focus of Christ's statement here. The primary focus of what Jesus Christ said here is on

the **non-tangible good** that God will give to those of His children who ask Him. Christ was not speaking about "things" at all! That is why He didn't use a noun to go with the word "good". Christ used the word "good" in a stand-alone construction.

This is just one more subtle mistranslation. There are hundreds of little mistranslations like this throughout the whole Bible, and they do add up to distorting the overall picture. This verse here is just one more example of a small mistranslation **changing the focus** of a biblical statement.

Now notice the next verse. This shows what Jesus Christ had in mind in this whole section from verse 7 to verse 12.

Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should **do** to you, **do** ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets. (Matthew 7:12)

Notice that here Jesus Christ is not speaking about "asking" at all! He is speaking about **our conduct**, what we do and how we treat other people. Now what does this have to do with "asking"? Here is the point:

When we treat other people the same way that we ourselves would like to be treated by others, then God will "grant good" to us in how those people will respond to us and treat us. Verse 12 elaborates on circumstances in which God will "grant good" to us, as stated in verse 11. These two verses go together, with the second verse starting with the word "therefore".

By concluding this thought with the expression "for this is the law and the prophets" Jesus Christ made clear that the "asking" and the "giving" must be seen in the context of us putting into practice all the things He had expounded in chapters 5 and 6, i.e. in how we put Christianity into practice in our daily lives.

Simply stated:

In Matthew 7:7-12 Jesus Christ was saying that when we "ask" God for anything that will enable us to practice true Christianity more fully, **then** God will surely "give" us that help. The focus is on learning how to treat other people; the focus is on "**do you even so to them**" (Matthew 7:12). In other words, receiving an answer from God is contingent on how we treat other people. This is a condition for receiving answers from God.

A CLOSE LOOK AT MATTHEW 7:7

Here is this verse again.

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: (Matthew 7:7)

What do the three words "ask ... seek ... knock" tell us? What is the focus of these three words?

The word "**seek**" tells us that **we are searching for something**, but we are not sure where to find that something. The word "**knock**" likewise tells us that we are looking for something, but we are not sure which door will lead to what we are looking for. And so **we test the possible answers** by "knocking" on every door we come across.

We need to see the word "ask" in the context of "seek" and "knock", rather than viewing "ask" in isolation. In other words, the words "ask", "seek" and "knock" all deal with the same subject. And these three verbs are intended to present a progression.

The asking leads to seeking, and the seeking leads to knocking, and the knocking leads to answers and to doors being opened.

It should be easy to see that the "seeking" and the "knocking" involve a search for answers to questions we have. This implies that the "asking" likewise is not about things, but about searching for answers.

So here is the point about Matthew 7:7.

If we **ask the right questions**, then it shall be given unto us; if we **seek the correct answers**, then we will find them; if we **test the various answers** that we find (i.e. we knock), then the correct answers will be opened unto us, i.e. become clear to us.

The whole process of asking, seeking and knocking has to do with seeking a better understanding of the mind of God and of God's way of life. It is not about asking for things or goods or attributes at all. It is asking for a better understanding of the Bible, of God's laws and God's purposes.

This asking, seeking and knocking has **an outward focus**, a focus away from self. It is not an inward focus about something coming to us, or about us getting something. The entire focus of the sermon on the mount is outward, away from self. And Matthew 7:7 also addresses that same outward focus.

Let's keep in mind that a few verses before Matthew 7:7 Jesus Christ had already said **"take no thought for your life"** (Matthew 6:25) and **"take therefore no thought for the morrow"** (Matthew 6:34). And so "ask ... seek ... knock" must obviously take Matthew 6:25 and Matthew 6:34 into account. It is not that Matthew 7:7 somehow contradicts these earlier statements by Jesus Christ. No, **Matthew 7:7 complements these earlier statements.**

Matthew 7:7 is not intended for asking for "things" at all. The asking in Matthew 7:7 is quite different from asking God for our daily needs in Matthew 6:11. Here in Matthew 7:7 the asking is in the context of seeking something specific. **We cannot seek if we don't know what we are looking for.** So Matthew 7:7 addresses the situation where we are looking for something very specific. And in order to find that specific something we have to ask and seek and knock.

THE KEY FOR A BETTER UNDERSTANDING

Let's consider the following request to God: "Please give me a better understanding of the Bible". Is God going to answer this request? Probably not as it stands. Why?

The Bible contains over 31,000 verses. So asking God for a better understanding of the Bible amounts to asking God for a better understanding of over 31,000 verses. The request for a better understanding of the whole Bible amounts to wanting God to give us something on a platter, without us ourselves putting out any efforts to come to a better understanding.

Now it takes the Spirit of God to understand "the things of God" (see 1 Corinthians 2:11). So asking God for a better understanding of the whole Bible is like asking God to give us "a truckload of His Spirit" all in one go. And that is not how God gives His Spirit to anyone. Jesus Christ is the only one who has ever had God's Spirit in unlimited supply (see John 3:34). But in this life none of us ever have that type of

unlimited access to the power of God.

The point is this:

God will give us the free gift of His Holy Spirit in relation to **how much effort** we put out to achieve things that will require the help of God's Spirit. The request "please give me a better understanding of the Bible" has **no focus** whatsoever. It is a request that is not based on us seeking anything specific, and we are not knocking on any doors for specific answers. We are simply asking for everything (i.e. the whole Bible) without seeking anything specific. This type of request is totally removed from the "seek and knock" approach.

Furthermore, if God really were to answer that request one minute later, **how would you know** that God has answered it, and what would you do? Where do you start? Without seeking and knocking you could never know that God has actually answered your request for a better understanding, could you?

Do you really expect God to give you a better understanding of verses or subjects that you yourself haven't even bothered to examine more closely? As it stands, this request shows that you want something for nothing, without you yourself putting out any effort.

The request for a better understanding of the whole Bible gives God no indication what you intend to do with that better understanding. **Why** do you want a better understanding of the whole Bible? Have you actually read the whole Bible?

Here is how to have God give you, who are already a member of God's Church, a better understanding.

1) **It must always start with you.** You must have a **very specific question**, to which you are seeking an answer. It could be a specific verse or passage in the Bible that puzzles you. Or it could be a subject where you realize that your understanding is limited or unclear. Or it could be a question someone asked you, for which you didn't have a satisfactory answer.

2) This means that you have already tried to come to a better understanding of that verse or subject or question on your own. You have made the effort to read the passage that puzzles you, and **you have thought about it**. It is your attempts at trying to understand that helped you realize that you don't understand it yet. If it was a question that was brought to you and you couldn't answer it, you realized that you lacked understanding.

3) In this situation **you now approach God** in prayer, and you ask God for very specific understanding. Your request has a clear focus. You are asking God to help you understand the verse or passage that is puzzling you. Or you ask God to help you understand the specific subject that is unclear to you. Or you ask God to help you understand the question that was brought to you. This is not a general "please give me something" request; this is a "please help me to understand something very specific" request, and it implies that you yourself are putting out your maximum effort to come to a good understanding.

4) You understand that God is obviously not going to answer your request with an email. So **what method will God use to answer your request?** Is there anything God expects you to do in order for you to receive an answer from God? Does God have **any conditions** that you must meet in order to receive an answer to such a specific request?

5) As already indicated, the primary condition God sets in this matter is that your yourself must **focus your mind on the subject** of your question. If you don't do that, then you will not get an answer from God. This is the reason why Mr. Armstrong, for example, never came to a good understanding of subjects that he himself had not examined very carefully.

God did not give Mr. Armstrong a carte blanche good understanding of every subject and every question. Mr. Armstrong's good understanding was restricted to those subjects that he himself personally studied and sought to understand more fully.

6) The way you focus your mind on the subject of your question is by **examining all the pertinent facts** that you can think of. If it is a specific verse in the Bible, then you read the whole context of that verse. You do your best to examine every word in that verse that could influence your understanding. You try to establish if you are in fact looking at a correct translation of the original Hebrew or Greek text. You try to view the verse from the speaker's or the writer's point of view.

You examine the Bible for other statements that could shed some light on the verse you are examining. If it is a subject you are trying to understand, then you search for all the passages in the Bible that appear to deal with that subject. You look for principles that might apply. You examine how this subject ties in with your overall understanding of God's plan and purposes.

In short: you do everything you can in an attempt to find the answers to your questions on your own. You put out a lot of effort on your own. In this way **you are showing God that you are serious** about wanting to understand this particular matter.

7) You are very careful to **avoid one fatal flaw**. That one fatal flaw is that people start out with the answer to their own question, and all they are really looking for is information to endorse the answer they unquestioningly accepted from the start. This unfortunately happens very commonly, that people search for proof to support their own ideas. Facts that contradict their own preconceived conclusions they reject out of hand, or they try to disparage those facts, or else they try unsuccessfully to argue away those undesirable facts.

This biased approach you avoid like the plague, by **never rejecting facts** that don't agree with the understanding you have at that point in time. Facts are facts, and we can't just shove them around like a bunch of bread rolls baking in a pizza oven. If you reject facts that you don't like, then God will never give you a correct understanding of that particular subject.

Now if we follow these basic steps then we are asking, seeking and knocking as Jesus Christ has instructed us to do. And then we will assuredly receive an answer from God.

Think of Daniel and his three friends who took a very specific question to God. That specific question was: please show us what King Nebuchadnezzar has dreamed and what that dream means. See Daniel 2:17-18. This specific request God then answered "in a night vision" for Daniel (see Daniel 2:19). Notice what Daniel then said to God in prayer: "**You have made known** unto me now what we desired of You, for **You have now made known** unto us the king's matter" (Daniel 2:23). They had approached God with very specific questions, and these questions God had answered.

So in order to receive a better understanding from God we need to have a specific focus for our requests, asking for understanding of very specific subjects or matters, rather than asking for generally a better understanding of the whole Bible.

Once we have asked God for an understanding in very specific matters, at that point we need to **learn to recognize the answers** that God gives us. We need to learn this because in many cases God's answers don't come the way we might expect them to come. And there are different ways in which God may present the answers to our questions to us.

DIFFERENT WAYS IN WHICH GOD GIVES US ANSWERS

Consider the time when Samuel was still a little boy. God started to use Samuel to deliver God's messages to the people of Israel. But Samuel at first did not recognize God's ways of working with people. You know the story.

The boy Samuel had gone to bed and then God "called Samuel" (1 Samuel 3:4). Samuel had no idea that it was God who had called him, and so Samuel mistakenly ran to Eli (1 Samuel 3:5). It was only after God had called Samuel the fourth time that Samuel said "speak for Your servant hears" (1 Samuel 3:10).

The point is this:

It is extremely unusual for a mortal human being to have direct communication with the Creator God. Far in excess of 99% of all human beings have never yet experienced that type of interaction. It is not just that we dutifully pray to God and then get up off our knees and go to sleep, with the full confidence that God has heard our prayers.

This is a matter of grasping that **the question** we asked God just now (or yesterday or last week) **has just been answered by God in heaven**. That is an awesome recognition! It is no longer just a one-way conversation, where we respectfully pray to God and then continue with our daily lives and our activities. This is a matter of recognizing that God has in effect spoken to us, not audibly of course, but in placing the answer to our question right before our eyes. It is like a light has just been switched on. We understand the answer to our question, and it is something we didn't understand an hour earlier. And we know that we didn't understand this an hour earlier. That is how it was for Daniel and his three friends.

Now there are two main ways that God will give us answers when we "ask, seek and knock". Either God will give us the answer directly by putting that answer into our minds, or God will give us the answer through other people to whom God has already in the past given the correct understanding of our specific question. This second method is by far the more common one used by God.

GOD GIVES US AN ANSWER THROUGH OTHER PEOPLE

This is by far the main way that God answers our "ask, seek and knock" questions. We see this principle throughout God's creation.

God created plants and then those plants produce seeds and create more plants. God created pairs of animals, and these animals then multiplied and produced more animals. God created Adam and Eve and God then instructed them to be fruitful and to multiply.

God gave instructions to Moses and then instructed Moses to disseminate those instructions throughout the nation of Israel. God gave messages to His prophets and then the people learned about God's messages from the prophets. Jesus Christ taught His apostles and then sent them out to teach other people.

The point we need to understand is that **God in most things does not engage in doing repetitive tasks**. God's way of doing things is to initiate something, which then sets a process in motion. God then has His creation take care of continuing the processes that God has set in motion. God's creation then takes care of the repetitive tasks that may be required.

Can you understand this principle?

Now as far as answering our questions for a better understanding is concerned:

If over a period of time 100,000 people around the Earth have the same questions for understanding a specific teaching or subject (e.g. "do we have an immortal soul?"), then God is in most cases not going to give each one of those 100,000 people a personal answer, so that those 100,000 people all come to understand the same correct answers all on their own.

[Note! I am here not speaking about how God answers our personal prayers for help and protection and our daily needs, etc. That is a completely different matter. Here I am speaking about large numbers of people asking God for an understanding of the same subjects or of the same Scriptures. Here we are dealing with "ask ... seek ... knock" and not with "give us this day our daily bread".]

In most cases God is going to give the first person to ask God those specific questions an understanding of the correct answers, provided the person has put out considerable effort to come to a correct understanding and is willing to reject all preconceived ideas, while simultaneously asking God for a correct understanding of that specific subject. And that correct understanding will come to that person suddenly, where they will realize that even an hour earlier they had not yet understood the correct answers. And in most cases it will probably "come to them" while they are engaged in thinking deeply about the subject.

When God in that way gives someone a correct understanding of a specific doctrine or subject, then that also imposes on that person **the responsibility to make that correct understanding available to others** who are searching for the same answers. This removes from God the necessity to repeatedly answer the same doctrinal questions from different people. That is like God planting the seed and then letting the process continue on its own, where more seeds are produced for creating more plants, without needing additional direct input from God.

From then onwards generally speaking, without precluding the possibility of some exceptions to this rule, God will direct all future requests for answers to those specific subjects to the person to whom God had first given the correct understanding.

This is what happened with Mr. Armstrong!

Almost 90 years ago Mr. Armstrong started to ask questions that nobody else was asking. And Mr. Armstrong made a serious in-depth search for the correct answers, all the while looking to God to give him an understanding of all the questions he was looking into.

So God began to give Mr. Armstrong an understanding of one subject after another. It was always conditional on Mr. Armstrong himself making a serious effort to come to a better understanding of the Bible, verse by verse and chapter by chapter.

God did not give Mr. Armstrong any understanding of subjects that Mr. Armstrong himself never bothered to study and to examine. In most of those cases it was that Mr. Armstrong **did not perceive a need** to study those specific subjects or questions. And therefore he also was not given an understanding of those particular subjects.

But with greater understanding came also a responsibility for Mr. Armstrong to make the understanding God had given him available to other people who were searching for the same answers. Somehow Mr. Armstrong perceived that responsibility. And so he felt compelled to write up in article form **every new understanding he came to** in that process of asking, seeking and knocking.

Once Mr. Armstrong had explained his new understanding in writing, then he looked for ways to get that information to other people. Meanwhile, if other people approached God with the same specific questions for which God had given Mr. Armstrong a correct understanding, then wherever feasible God answered the questions of these people by seeing to it that they were somehow exposed to the answers Mr. Armstrong had laid out in writing.

I say "where feasible" because people in other parts of the world could ask God the same sincere questions, and those people had no opportunity to be exposed to the writings of Mr. Armstrong. The same applied to people who in the 1930's and 1940's lived in other parts of the U.S., far from Mr. Armstrong. If they had those same questions, they had no opportunity to be exposed to Mr. Armstrong's writings, while Mr. Armstrong still lived in Oregon, where he was very limited in reaching people in other areas.

So in response to earnest requests for specific understanding God would give those people a correct understanding directly, without those people first having to be exposed to Mr. Armstrong's writings. This applied, for example, to Mr. Harold Jackson (an evangelist in the Church, born in 1911 and died in 1991), who in the 1930's was earnestly searching for answers to many of the same questions Mr. Armstrong was asking.

In the 1930's Mr. Jackson had no opportunities to be exposed to the few articles Mr. Armstrong was writing up in Oregon. So God gave Mr. Jackson certain understanding directly in the 1930's, and then brought Mr. Jackson into contact with Mr. Armstrong in the early 1950's, an account that Mr. Jackson told me personally over a meal in our home in Port Elizabeth, South Africa in the early 1980's.

So here is the point:

Once God has provided the answers to serious "ask ... seek ... knock" questions, in time those answers appear in print in the work of God's Church. And then when more people have those same questions, in most cases God will bring the Church's printed explanations of those questions to the attention of those additional people. Those additional people will then receive their answers from God when they carefully study the printed material. (By "printed material" I mean both printed hard copies as well as in our time material in the form of computer files.)

Those who study these materials will then experience the same process as was the case for the original person to have those questions answered by God. As they study the literature, they will experience occasions where they realize that they have just understood something that they hadn't yet understood an hour earlier. **Those are the moments** when "it is given to them" and when "they find" and when "it is opened to them".

Many thousands of us experienced those types of "moments" when we read some of Mr. Armstrong's booklets for the very first time, back in the 50's, 60's, 70's and 80's (he died in 1986). Through those booklets God gave us the same answers that God had earlier given to Mr. Armstrong in response to Mr. Armstrong's earnest examination of those subjects.

To get back to young Samuel: it took a few attempts (i.e. 3) before Samuel understood that God was communicating with him. So when God called him a fourth time, then Samuel was ready. And from then onwards Samuel always recognized correctly when God initiated a contact with Samuel. Samuel had learned how God would communicate with him in future circumstances.

The same can be true for us. The very first time God actually gave us an answer to a specific question (i.e. for most of us that would have been through a booklet or article Mr. Armstrong had written) we might not have recognized that God was answering our question. But when that process happens repeatedly –

we ask God questions and then receive access to literature that answers our questions – then we have the opportunity to grasp that God is literally answering the questions we had asked God.

So we see both types of answers from God represented right here.

1) God gave Mr. Armstrong the answers directly by, in response to earnest requests for specific understanding, putting those answers into Mr. Armstrong's mind, and he then wrote those answers up in his own words and in his own ways of expressing himself. Those answers were assuredly not on the same level as the Scriptures, but they did make available correct understanding.

2) God gave us the answers by seeing to it that we would receive access to Mr. Armstrong's literature that explained our questions. This was one way in which God fulfilled the statement "for every one that asks receives ...".

During the 70's and 80's I visited many hundreds of people who had contacted God's Church, and who had many questions about the Bible and about the Church. And on many occasions on repeat visits people would say something like: "I actually had a lot more questions to ask you since your last visit, but then I received the latest copy of the magazine (or certain booklets I had requested), and most of my questions were actually answered in that edition of the magazine (or in those booklets)".

It was very evident to me that God was answering many of their questions even before I could get back to them for the next visit. Other ministers have mentioned that they experienced basically the same thing many times themselves. These are examples of "ask and it shall be given to you" in action, of God answering our questions by exposing us to the correct answers that other people have already put down in writing.

ANOTHER KEY FOR UNDERSTANDING

In Matthew 7:7 Jesus Christ was encouraging us to ask God for greater understanding. But it is not just a matter of us asking God anything that happens to come into our minds. Some questions God will answer and other questions God will not answer. So here is another important point in our quest for a better understanding of the things of God:

One key for receiving answers from God is to **ask the right questions!**

If we are trying to understand a particular subject that is new or unclear to us, it's no good asking God "please help me to understand this subject correctly" without us ourselves at the same time also examining every fact relating to that subject, that we can lay our hands on.

In examining all the facts available to us, we need to ask God for very specific understanding. We need to present to God the specific matter that is unclear to us, and why it is unclear and what exactly we don't understand. We need to present to God the Scriptures that call into question our present understanding, asking God to show us the way out of **the maze we have wandered into** with this particular subject. There must be answers that are compatible with everything else about God, and those are the answers we are asking God to give to us.

In this process we must **learn to think "outside of the box"**, because thinking "within the box" sets restrictions to our understanding that may not be justified at all.

Consider the Pharisees during Christ's ministry:

The Pharisees understood that God does not want us to work on the Sabbath. This understanding sets clear restrictions for Sabbath activities. Thinking "within the box" meant that the Pharisees (and that included the Apostle Paul before his conversion!) couldn't grasp that anything that in their eyes could be classified as "work" could possibly be acceptable to God.

And so a great many of their Sabbath rules revolved around trying to define "work" for things like walking or carrying items or doing certain activities. Thinking "within the box" meant that for the Pharisees these activities in themselves became the deciding factors in determining what was acceptable on the Sabbath and what was not acceptable on the Sabbath. This thinking also allowed the Pharisees to find ways around all of the Sabbath rules they had established.

To these people Jesus Christ time and again presented situations that demanded that people think "outside of the box". Someone thinking "outside of the box" recognizes that the Sabbath commandment is not an end in itself. God gave the Sabbath commandment to achieve a desirable result, and the Sabbath was never intended to be an end in itself.

So thinking "outside of the box" will help someone to realize that God certainly expects us to deal with genuine emergencies like fires, floods, hurricanes, accidents, etc., even on the Sabbath. Likewise, God does not view acts of compassion to alleviate another person's genuine suffering as a transgression of the Sabbath. So in no way did Jesus Christ's healing conflict with God's instructions for Sabbath-keeping. Someone "thinking outside of the box" always seeks to understand **God's real intentions** for every law and for every instruction.

It was "thinking outside of the box" that later helped Paul to understand that all the ritualistic laws and also the law of circumcision were not a requirement that God expected the non-Jews who came into the Church to practice. See Scriptures like Acts 15:1-2, etc. In Paul's case, his ability to think "outside of the box" of his previous pharisaical background was obviously greatly enhanced by the personal training he received from Jesus Christ in Arabia (2 Corinthians 12:1-4, etc.).

Now the point here for us is this:

All human beings spontaneously restrict their thinking to "inside the box". Whatever beliefs and convictions we have accepted since childhood form our own particular "box", and most people never progress beyond thinking "inside the box". That also applied to the Pharisees. And that applies to almost all religious people of all persuasions, that all their lives their thinking remains shackled to their particular "boxes".

Likewise, all of us in God's Church spontaneously restrict our thinking to "inside the box" for every doctrinal question, and for every explanation of the Scriptures. Our thinking is restricted to the understanding we have all been taught all the time we have been in the Church. In this way we ourselves place restrictions on our own understanding. Now such restrictions are a huge problem when we have to confront things where our present understanding is somewhat flawed or even grossly in error.

As long as we can only think "within the box" in dealing with such questions, we can never come to a correct understanding. Someone **"thinking within the box" can never accept facts that contradict our present understanding**, and so such thinking will force us to argue against facts, even when we are incapable of refuting them.

Now asking God the right questions means that we pluck up the courage to ask God questions that are "outside of the box". **As long as we restrict our questions to things "within the box", we are not going to get any direct answers from God.** Questions "within the box" are restricted to things the

Church already understands, and with those things God does not need to provide any direct answers. The answers are already available within the Church, and we simply need to make the effort to study the relevant information.

Questions "outside the box", on the other hand, reveal that our minds are open to the possibility that some of our present understanding may need to be modified. And that is a vital key to receiving answers from God. So let me state this in plain terms:

God will only answer our questions for a better understanding of certain subjects if our minds are open to at least the possibility that our present understanding may not be fully correct. And it is asking questions "outside of the box" that will reveal this required mindset to God.

This is where "ask and it shall be given" enters the picture. Every single new understanding that Mr. Armstrong came to was a result of Mr. Armstrong having been willing to ask questions "outside of the box". The very fact of honestly asking such questions "outside of the box" indicates that our minds are open to answers that may also lie "outside of the box".

To receive answers from God we have to provide **the right mental environment** in our own minds. If our minds are convinced that something is true, then no amount of evidence to the contrary can convince us otherwise. For example:

- Those who are convinced that man has an immortal soul ...
- Those who are convinced that God is a trinity ...
- Those who are convinced that they will go to heaven ...
- Those who are convinced that Christmas honors Jesus Christ ...
- Those who are convinced that we must keep Sunday ...
- Those who are convinced that Christ rose on Sunday morning ...
- Those who are convinced that Lucifer was Satan's name ...
- Those who are convinced that we must use the Jewish calendar ...
- Those who are convinced that demons have physical powers ...
- Those who are convinced that unitarianism is correct ...
- Those who are convinced that Christ was created by God ...
- Those who are convinced that we must use "sacred names" ...
- Those who are convinced that a full moon starts a new month ...
- Those who are convinced that a 15th day Passover is correct ...
- Those who are convinced that Mr. Armstrong was Elijah ...

... **will not be persuaded** that they are wrong, no matter what factual evidence to contradict their view

may be provided to them. The mental environment in their own minds makes it impossible for them to accept that they could possibly be wrong. **They themselves are responsible for that mental environment!**

And when anyone provides the wrong mental environment for a specific subject or question, then God will assuredly not give that person the correct answer. God will never give a correct answer to someone whose mind presents a mental environment that is in fact **hostile towards the correct answer**.

Now it is the questions we ask God that expose the mental environment in our minds. Restricting all our questions to "within the box" shows God that our minds are not willing to deal with answers that fall "outside of the box".

We have to be willing to ask questions that fall "outside the box", and we have to be willing to examine answers that fall "outside the box". We obviously evaluate all answers for accuracy, correctness and sound logic. A correct answer will always stand up to close inspection and scrutiny, whether that answer is "inside the box" or "outside the box". A correct answer should never fear any questions that might be asked.

So a major key for receiving answers from God to our questions is to ask **the right questions**, and to provide **the right mental environment** in our own minds.

COMING TO NEW UNDERSTANDING

There will undoubtedly also be occasions where we are reading some passage in the Bible with a questioning mind, and from one minute to the next we realize that we now understand something that we didn't understand yesterday.

Now when that happens, then there are **two possibilities**:

Is the new personal understanding we have so suddenly come to compatible with and fully **in agreement** with all the other teachings we already understand? Or is this new personal understanding **at odds** with the things we have believed up till then? Does this new personal understanding require us to do something differently from what we have always practiced, or does it fit in with what we are already doing?

If this new personal understanding is fully in agreement with all the teachings we have always accepted, then our new understanding is quite likely due to God opening our minds to a better understanding in response to us reading the Bible with a searching frame of mind.

But if our new personal understanding is at odds with the things the Church has taught us, then **that could be either good or bad**. It could be that God has given us new understanding, which is good; but it could also be that Satan has thrown a stumbling block in our path, which is bad. So whenever we come to some new understanding that calls certain teachings of the Church into question, then we need to "try the spirits" (1 John 4:1). This means that we have to test the new understanding, as to whether it is correct or not.

TEST NEW UNDERSTANDING

Let's look at 1 John 4:1.

Beloved, believe not every spirit, but **try the spirits whether they are of God**: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. (1 John 4:1)

We should also keep an admonition from the Apostle Paul in mind.

How is it then, brethren? when you come together, **every one of you** has a psalm, has **a doctrine**, has a tongue, has **a revelation**, has **an interpretation**. Let all things be done unto edifying. (1 Corinthians 14:26)

We today are like those people in the Church at Corinth, in that **we today also have hundreds of different "doctrines" and "revelations" and "interpretations" floating around the scattered Church of God groups**. If anything, today we have compounded that situation in Corinth by a factor of ten. And it all goes back to a multitude of people having come to "new understanding".

A small part of that "new understanding" in our present age is right and true, and it can be proved to be so. But the greater part of all that "new understanding" today is flawed and wrong. That was true when John wrote "many false prophets are gone out into the world", and that is true today amongst the people of God.

In 1 John 4:1 we could replace the word "spirit" with the words "new understanding", or with the words "new truth", because that is what John was speaking about. John was saying:

Beloved, believe not every new truth, but **try those new truths** whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.

Keep in mind that the Apostle John himself was the author of a great deal of "new truth" for the Church at that time. The entire Book of Revelation presented new truth to the Church. In addition, until John recorded the footwashing at Christ's last Passover, the Church as a whole was unaware of this part of the Passover service. Various other things from Christ's ministry that are only mentioned in John's Gospel also represented "new truth" for most of the members of the Church at that time.

So in no way was the Apostle John opposed to new truth that is indeed truth. Therefore John said "test all new truth", because much of what is passed off as "new truth" is in fact not truth at all. We have a responsibility to not accept any new teachings or explanations for the Scriptures without **first proving those things to be true**.

So how do we do that?

We do that in exactly the same way as we proved every teaching presented to us when we first came into God's Church and into an understanding of the truth of God. We must examine the biblical evidence that is presented to support any and every teaching of the Church.

So when today someone presents new truth or new understanding to us, then we follow that same procedure of examining the evidence. And when we follow that same procedure, then there are three possible outcomes:

- 1) The Bible does indeed support the new understanding.
- 2) There is no biblical support for the new understanding.

3) The Bible in fact contradicts the new understanding.

When we have reached one of these three possible outcomes, then it is time to apply 1 Thessalonians 5:21.

Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. (1 Thessalonians 5:21)

Diligently complying with the first part of this instruction (i.e. prove all things) implies that we "asked God" to help us understand His truth. Having examined the facts, we have reached one of the above three conclusions. God has now given us an answer. And so it is time for us to apply that answer in our overall understanding.

If there is no biblical support for the new understanding that was presented to our minds, or worse, if the Bible in fact contradicts that new understanding (i.e. outcomes 2 and 3 above), then we must reject it. We have not found any proof to justify accepting that new understanding. Or we have found clear proof that what was presented to us as "new truth" is in fact in opposition to what the Bible actually teaches. So we must reject it.

If we found that the Bible does indeed support the new understanding, then we need to accept it. We also need to then accept any modifications of the greater overall picture that may be necessitated by the new understanding. Sometimes a new understanding may put other beliefs or teachings into a different perspective.

Sometimes "ask and it shall be given" can have very profound consequences, consequences that we were not really able to foresee. And sometimes that creates some difficulties for us.

Here is the point:

Some new understanding that we believe we have proved to be correct may require us to make some changes in our conduct and in our behavior.

For example:

When someone not associated with God's Church first comes to understand that the observance of Christmas is not only non-biblical, but that it is in fact a thoroughly pagan custom disguised as supposedly being Christian, then that person is faced with the decision of what to do and how to conduct himself the next time Christmas comes around. Is he going to continue this pagan observance for the sake of not offending family and friends? Or is he going to sever all ties with all aspects of Christmas observance and risk alienating close family members and perhaps even his employer?

[The same applies to coming to new understanding about Easter, Halloween, the Sabbath and the Holy Days, clean and unclean meats, the Jewish calendar, etc. New understanding in all of these areas may require us to make some changes in how we conduct our lives.]

Suddenly there is a price attached to putting this new understanding into practice. This creates a pressure in the person's mind. Some people will then implement their new understanding, in spite of such pressure and in spite of any adverse effects this may have on their relationships with other people.

And other people will value their present relationships with other people as being more important than this new understanding. And therefore they will then seek to discredit that new understanding, so that their own conscience will not condemn them for rejecting the new understanding. When these people first started to understand the new understanding, they had not grasped what the consequences of that

new understanding would be.

To make this quite plain:

When some people reject new understanding, even when they are unable to prove it wrong, when privately they themselves in fact can recognize that the new understanding is correct, then that rejection is because **they fear the inevitable consequences** that are attached to that particular new understanding. They fear that they will have to change in some way, and they don't want to change.

These are people who had asked and they were given answers, but they don't like the automatic consequences that are attached to those answers. And therefore they seek to then discredit those answers.

So Jesus Christ said: ask and it shall be given to you; seek and you shall find; knock and it shall be opened unto you. However, sometimes we are given more than we bargained for; we find more than we were looking for; and more is opened unto us than we had hoped for. When that happens to us, then those situations represent major tests of our character.

Have you ever heard people say "**I don't want to know that**"? Have you ever said this yourself? This statement illustrates one more important lesson for Matthew 7:7. And that lesson is this:

When we ask God for understanding, when we seek and knock, then we also surrender to God exactly how God will answer our search for a greater understanding. We don't control how much God will show us. We don't control how much we will find, if we are truly searching. We cannot ask God to only show us things that will not require us ourselves to make any changes. **Anyone who truly seeks has lost control over just how much he will find.** Asking God for greater understanding always brings a responsibility with it. But added responsibility very often makes people uncomfortable. Added responsibility is always stressful.

Therefore the people who are not prepared to accept additional stress should not ask God for more understanding. We can't have one without the other. And more understanding always makes us more accountable to God.

So there is a lot more to "ask and it shall be given you" than initially meets the eye. But when we go about this the right way, then the statement that "every one that asks receives" will assuredly also apply to us.

Frank W Nelte