

Jesus On (12):
Asking

Introduction

There have been some fascinating studies done on what motivates us - what works and what doesn't.

For example, one study looked into whether paying people to exercise would motivate them to work out more. And it did - but only for about six months. Then the motivation failed.

Which led to other studies on whether it's best to be motivated internally or motivated externally.

Let's take reading a book.

If you want to read it because you love to read, or you enjoy the story, that's internal motivation.

If you're reading it because you're being paid \$5 dollars a book by your Mom, or you have to read it for a class or for work, then that's external motivation.

So which one works best?

A study involving more than 200,000 people found external motivation was good for quantity, and internal motivation was good for quality.

So let's go back to apply this to working out at the gym.

If you pay people to go to the gym, it increases how many times they'll go workout.

But the quality of the workout once they get there is completely dependent on whether they are *internally* motivated - if they are personally motivated by a goal, like losing a specific amount of weight, or competing in a triathlon.

So when it comes to motivation, we need both.

We often need some kind of incentive to get started, but then need something deeper - from the inside - to not only keep it up, but to have whatever it is we are doing reach its full potential for our lives.¹

So let me ask you a question - how could Jesus motivate you to do something spiritually?

What could He say, what could He promise, that would incentivize you both externally and internally in terms of both quantity and quality?

We're in a series through the Sermon on the Mount, the most famous message Jesus ever gave, recorded for us most fully in Matthew's biography of Jesus in the New Testament of the Bible.

And today, we come to where Jesus pulled out all the stops to try and motivate people to do one of the most important things spiritually a life can ever do.

To pray.

Here are His words:

"Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

"You parents – if your children ask for a loaf of bread, do you give them a stone instead? Or if they ask for a fish, do you give them a snake? Of course not! So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him." (Matthew 7:7-11, NLT)

I don't know where you're at in your prayer life, but does that make you even want to think a little bit about praying more?

It does for me.

So how is Jesus trying to motivate us to pray? There are three motivating factors in that passage we just read.

I. Three Motivations

First, Jesus tells us we should pray because God answers prayer.

Jesus makes it absolutely clear that there is no such thing as an unanswered prayer.

So keep doing it, because it will be answered!

That's first.

The **second** motivating factor is that it's only through prayer that brings God's response into the picture.

That's the whole idea behind not only the "keep on asking" part of this, but also the ideas of asking, seeking and knocking.

Richard Glover once wrote that it's like a child to a parent - if Mom is right there in the room, he just asks. If she isn't, he goes and finds her. If she's in the bedroom and the door is closed, he knocks.

But no matter what, Jesus says, if you keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking, you will gain God's response!

If you don't ask, if you don't seek, if you don't knock, then you won't get, you won't find and you won't have the door be opened.

So none of this, "Why pray - God's gonna do what God's gonna do" stuff. That is so silly!

What God has *willed* to do is to respond to prayer and take our prayers into account. So none of this fatalism stuff.

And then **third**, Jesus says you should pray because whatever it is that God gives to you, whatever it is that God helps you find, whatever door it is that God opens, will be good.

It will be a gift to your life.

Jesus says, "Listen, you know how you are as a parent to your child. Selfish and self-centered as you can be, would you ever give them something hurtful or cruel, mean or harmful?"

"Now think about God, the perfect Father. You think He's going to give you - His son, His daughter - who He loves, anything but something good?"

So add it all up:

Jesus says to pray because it will be answered, it's the only way to get God's answer, and the answer will always be a good one.

Pray! What more motivation do you need than that.

II. "Unanswered" Prayers

Now, I know, this raises lots of questions, beginning with the obvious one:

"If God answers every prayer, why is my life so full of unanswered ones?"

"I've prayed for a husband - still single!"

"I've prayed for a job - still unemployed!"

"I've prayed for healing - still sick!"

"I've prayed for a new set of kids - still have the same set of kids!"

Let's take a little poll.

How many of you, regardless of what you may intellectually know and biblically believe about prayer, have felt at one time or another that God has left a prayer unanswered in your life?

Willing to own that one?

I've certainly felt that way. It's an easy feeling to have. But that's what it is - a feeling.

It is a subjective assessment. A judgment. A perception. It's not reality.

Because here's the truth:

God has answered every prayer you have ever prayed as a Christ follower.

But the way He's answered them may not have been what you wanted to hear. Or you were willing to hear. Or when you wanted to hear it. Or it was an answer you could not have possibly imagined hearing.

So, when the answer came, it never entered your mind that it was the answer.

It's like we treat prayer like Amazon. We click everything we want, we hit buy, and we expect our answer package on our doorstep by no later than a day or two.

And if it doesn't come, then our assessment is bad customer service - that God obviously didn't answer.

The truth is that God promises to answer every prayer. But - and hang with me here - *how* He chooses to answer them is another deal.

III. When God Says "No"

So let's talk about some of the possible answers He's given you.

For example, did you ever think that if what you prayed for, what you asked for, was not really best, that God may have given you His answer and the answer was "No"?

But "No" is not an unanswered prayer. He's answered and said "No."

Some prayer requests - no matter how well-intentioned - are inappropriate, not best for you, or just plain dumb.

Let's look at an example from the Bible.

This is from an interaction Jesus had with some of His first followers.

It says:

"... the mother of the Zebedee brothers came [James and John] with her two sons and knelt before Jesus with a request.

"'What do you want?' Jesus asked. She said, 'Give your word that these two sons of mine will be awarded the highest places of honor in your kingdom, one at your right hand, one at your left hand.' Jesus responded, 'You have no idea what you're asking.'"
(Matthew 20:20-22, Msg)

How's that for an answer?

Good Jewish Mom comes with her two boys and wants them to have the best seats in the spiritual house.

And Jesus not only says "No," but goes further and says, "You have no idea what you're asking!"

Meaning, "If you did, you wouldn't have asked for that."

Think about it - when did Jesus come into His full honor?

When He was hanging on a cross.

To have been on His left and right at that moment would have meant hanging from a cross as well.

She had no idea what she was asking for.

So play it all back:

The request was heard. Jesus obviously cared for her sons - they were two of His closest disciples and John was thought to be His best friend. But the answer was, "No."

Let's stay with James and John, because their family had a knack for dumb requests.

One day Jesus and His followers were traveling to Jerusalem. One of the cities they had to go through was Samaria.

If you were with us last week, we talked a little about how, historically, Jews and Samaritans didn't get along. And some of that was still coursing through the disciples even though Jesus was trying to get it out of them.

But here's what happened:

"They went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him, but the people there did not welcome him... When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, 'Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?'" (Luke 9:52-54, NIV)

How's that for a prayer request?! They get unfriended on Facebook and it's time for napalm!

But again, play it back:

They were sincere. They felt that request made sense and was appropriate in terms of what had happened. And Jesus gave them a three-word answer:

"Of course not!" (Luke 9:55, Msg)

Doesn't it just make sense that while God hears every prayer we have ever prayed, and cares deeply about us, the answer can still be, "No?"

I love my grandbabies more than anything in the world.

And they know that if they want something, just bypass mom and dad and go straight to Papa, because I'm an easy touch.

But even I have to say, "No."

And I'm the guy that lets them eat ice cream for breakfast, stay up past bedtime and make s'mores in the living room over a can of sterno.

It's true. We got caught.

But I would never say yes to anything that would hurt them. That would harm them. That wouldn't be best for their life.

Even if they don't understand, even it makes them sad, even if it makes them cry. The answer is still, "No."

Could it be that we are to God, like our kids are to us?

Is it possible that we could make requests that make perfect sense to us but in reality are short-sighted, immature, self-serving, or just plain wrong?

And we don't know it?

If so, then is it possible that God might just love us too much to say, "Yes?"

Now, I know that some of you are thinking, "I'm with you on how God could say 'No' to some things, but how could it be best that somebody suffer, or even die?"

"All I prayed for was that they would get well! How can that be so bad to ask for?"

I think that's a fair question.

Sometimes there is nothing less than a mystery surrounding God's answers to our prayers.

I've had times in my life when no matter how I look at it, and no matter what angle I turn, there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with the request.

But God's answer is still a deafening "No." And I don't know why. But let me tell you what I do know.

I do know that God knows more than I do, more than any of us and, ultimately, we have to settle it within ourselves as a matter of trust.

And if you think that's a cop-out, I disagree. I think it's just a frank assessment of what the core issue really is.

It all comes down to how you view the character of God.

Either He's a good God, or He's not.

You have to settle that one. It's a character of God issue.

Either He can be trusted, or He can't.

When God seems to say "No," even when it makes no sense to you, you either believe He knows best, or He doesn't.

I've often shared with people a simple truth that I believe with all my heart:

"Nothing happens to you as a follower of Christ that does not first pass through the hands of a God wildly in love with you."

Let me say that again:

"Nothing happens to you as a follower of Christ that does not first pass through the hands of a God wildly in love with you."

So while we may not understand it all, or know the reasons for God's answers, we can trust Him - because He loves us, and loves those around us, more than we can possibly imagine.

So while we might not have the answer, we can trust in the One who does.

IV. When God Says "Not Yet"

But "No" isn't the only answer God can give that can make a prayer seem unanswered.

God can say, "Not now. Not yet. Not on the timetable you're asking for."

You see, we think we know when things should happen, but only God knows the perfect timing for our lives.

So sometimes when we make a request and there's a time dynamic to it, God says, "Not now."

And that's tough, because we've gotten used to instant answers, instant information and instant directions.

And we can pray that way. It's almost as if we've lost the "not yet" category in our thinking. All we're thinking is, "God, didn't you get my text?"

I've had people come to me and say, "You know, Jim, I don't know what to do. I've been praying about this thing every day since, well, today and God still hasn't done a thing about it."

So let me say it again:

If there is a timing problem with the prayer, at least in the way you're praying it, God may have answered it but His answer was "Not yet."

So what do you do with that?

You remember that God's timetable is better than yours, and He has information about the situation you don't have.

In other words, He has reasons for His "Not yet's." And, as I've heard people say, "His delays are not necessarily His denials."

It's as if God is saying, "Will you just trust me? I know what I'm doing - and when to do it."

"I really have the best timing. Now you need to keep praying - because this "not yet" might take a labor of prayer."

V. When Deep Calls to Deep

Which brings up another dynamic that might be going on - that what you're praying about isn't deep enough.

Now hang with me here, because this is not resting on the surface of this.

You haven't journeyed to the depth through what you're praying about that God knows you need to.

That God is wanting to answer you in a way that goes beyond "Yes," "No," or "Not yet."

The longer you do life with Christ, the more this becomes clear - simply because you learn it experientially.

Let me give you an example from Scripture. Listen to these words from the 42nd psalm - it reads like a page taken from someone's spiritual journal. In fact, much of the Psalms read like a journal entry or prayer:

"As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God... My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me all day long, 'Where is your God?'" (Psalm 42:1-3, NIV)

Here is someone who is hungering for a word from God. He alludes to a difficult time, a season where he has been calling out to God in the midst of pain, grief and confusion.

From all angles, it appears as if God is silent to his cries. So much so that those around him say, "Where is this God of yours that you pray to?"

But this is what he goes on to write in that same journal entry:

"Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God... My soul is downcast within me; therefore, I will remember you... Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls." (Psalm 42:5-7, NIV)

He comes to see that there is no silence from God - there's just an answer coming from God that's deeper than words.

God is present, and speaking, but what He's saying isn't resting on the surface waters of life. This is a season of prayer where deep is calling to deep.

Have you ever had one of those? I remember the first one I had.

I was 19 years old and in college, and I was invited to a weekend party at a nearby university.

My friend, Phil was going, and asked me to come along. There would be five of us crammed in the car.

I wanted to go and tried so hard to make it happen. But I couldn't get out of work that weekend and I had a test coming up on Monday that I had to study for.

They left without me on a Friday afternoon, rubbing it in my face the whole time.

Two days later, as they returned to campus, a car from the opposite flow of traffic crossed the dividing line, went airborne and landed headfirst into their car.

All four of my friends were killed instantly. The car I was supposed to be in. I first heard the news late that Sunday night and I was stunned.

I left my dorm, walked over to the nearby athletic complex, hopped a locked fence, and sat in the empty football stadium with no light but the moon.

I grieved for my friend; I thought of the brevity of life, and how close I had come to being killed.

I remember crying out to God, and I wasn't much of a praying person. But I remember crying out to God to help me sort it all out, to make sense of it all: "Talk to me... say something... anything!"

Seemingly, silence.

In truth, it was the deepest conversation God and I had ever had to that point in my life.

He was speaking to me, moving within me, communing and communicating with me on levels that I had never opened up to Him before and could barely recognize.

It was the start of many deep conversations, and within six months I became a Christian.

This is what "deep calling to deep" is about. It's not silence we're encountering, but a pregnant pause.

It's a prompting to engage in personal reflection so that the deepest of answers, the most profound of responses, can be given - and heard.

I cannot begin to tell you how important it is to look at prayer through the lens of this idea.

That when you pray, it may not be a simple "Yes," "No," or "Not yet."

The deepest maneuverings of God in the intricacies of your life may be taking place.

The events He is allowing, the answers He is giving, hold far more than meets the eye.

When I go through seasons where God's answers do not come quickly or on the surface of things - when the way God interacts with my prayers draws me deeper into Him for guidance and trust, dependence and obedience,

... and yet I keep praying and keep trying and keep listening for answers, the answers I find radically transcend what I initially sought to find.

I gain insight into who I am that I didn't have before, and gain depths of relationship with God that I had never experienced.

Redirecting the trajectory of my life in ways that never could have foreseen.

Deep calling to deep.

VI. Problem with the Pray-Er

Now so far, we've only looked at problems with the prayer.

The wrong request, or wrong timing, or not realizing the need to go deep with your prayers.

But what if there are problems with the pray-er?

What if the answer from God is that there is something we need to attend to first on our end before anything will be done about what we're praying for on His end?

What if the answer from God when we're praying is, "First things first? Can we deal with the elephant in the room? Can we talk about that?"

In other words, it's possible that something is wrong in our lives. That choices we've made, attitudes we have, and lifestyles we've embraced have set up a barrier between us and God.

This is hard to think about, because when we think God isn't answering our prayers, or answering them the way we want Him to, we automatically think that the problem lies with God. We even get mad at God.

That He doesn't care, isn't fully briefed on the situation, isn't able to perform; He just doesn't understand.

Or He just isn't answering.

But what if His answer really is, "First things first."

Let me give you just three examples of what some have called "prayer-busters" -

... actions and attitudes and situations where the answer to our prayer from God is, "You need to address this IN your life before I address what it is you've asked of me FOR your life."

A. Unconfessed Sin

The first prayer-buster is unconfessed sin.

Here's just one example of what the Bible teaches about how this affects things:

"Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear." (Isaiah 59:2, NIV)

Unconfessed, unrepentant sin cuts off our communication with God. It shuts down the relationship.

Notice the wording: it's not that God does not hear, but WILL not hear.

Meaning, He will not respond, be moved, be involved. Why?

Because you are showing complete disdain and indifference to Him and your relationship with Him.

Now let's make sure we know what the Bible is saying here.

It's not saying that you need to reach some state of sinless perfection before God engages your prayers.

It's not saying you have to be sin-free.

It's not about having areas where you struggle, slip-up, get sloppy, or could do better.

It's talking about areas of open, willful rebellion where you know you are rebelling, and you don't care.

You've decided that you are going to do it anyway.

In essence, you're saying, "I know what God wants, what God says, what God asks - and I've decided to say 'Screw you God.'

"What I want to do trumps what You say to do.

"I'm going to do it whether You like it or not; whether the Bible says it's wrong or not."

Wow. God is not to be mocked that way.

And the Bible makes it clear He's not, particularly when it comes to prayer.

Let me give you a taste of this in the Bible.

First, another journal entry from one of the authors of the Psalms, says:

"I cried out to him with my mouth... If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened." (Psalm 66:17, 19, NIV)

And then, from the great wisdom of the Proverbs, it says:

"If anyone turns a deaf ear to the law, even his prayers are detestable." (Proverbs 28:9, NIV)

And then these words from God Himself through the prophet Isaiah:

"When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen... wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight. Stop doing wrong, learn to do right." (Isaiah 1:15-17, NIV)

Let me put this as plainly as I know how:

If you're pursuing rebellion or sin in your life along these lines, don't waste another breath praying unless it's a prayer of confession.

B. Unresolved Relational Conflict

Let me give you another prayer-buster and this one might surprise you:

Unresolved relational conflict.

It was a big deal to Jesus, and here's what He had to say about it:

"If you enter your place of worship and, about to make an offering, you suddenly remember a grudge a friend has against you, abandon your offering, leave immediately, go to this friend and make things right. Then and only then, come back and work things out with God. If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift."
(Matthew 5:23-24, Msg)

Here was the situation.

People were coming to make an offering to atone for their sins at the Temple, wanting God to forgive them through this sacrifice and to get right with God.

That was good. But they were doing it as if their relationship with other people didn't matter.

They were coming to make sure things were cleared up "vertically" with God, but they were thinking, acting, believing and behaving as if getting things in order "horizontally" with other people was totally separate.

As if a lack of love toward others, a lack of forgiveness toward others, didn't matter when it came to their relationship with God.

But Jesus said, "It matters. It matters so much you should take care of it before you come to God about your own stuff."

Care for the horizontal before you come with the vertical.

C. Selfishness

Here's one more prayer-buster.

Selfishness.

Here's what the Bible says about this one:

"When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures." (James 4:3, NIV)

That's pretty straight forward, isn't it?

If your prayers are along the lines of:

"Make me famous,

... make me rich,

... make me have a good time,

... make all my dreams come true,

... and always give me the best parking spaces,"

... you obviously aren't connecting very well with the spirit of God.

Now we can get fancy with this and spiritual with this and pray, "God I only want to be famous so that I can influence others for Jesus."

Or, "God, make me rich so I can give lots of it away."

You know what the answer to that is?

If you aren't influencing others for Jesus now, a bigger platform isn't going to help.

If you aren't giving your money away now at the level you have, you won't give it away then.

Generosity isn't just something that comes with a bigger margin.

Conclusion

So let's get back to where we started.

Acknowledging that there are lots of ways God answers our prayers, and some ways we can mess up as the people praying them, let's not forget the big lesson that remains.

Jesus said we should be so motivated to pray, and here's why:

"Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

"You parents – if your children ask for a loaf of bread, do you give them a stone instead? Or if they ask for a fish, do you give them a snake? Of course not! So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him." (Matthew 7:7-11, NLT)

Let's stand for a closing prayer.

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/evidence-based-living/201704/what-motivates-us-and-why>