



Matthew 7:7-11

Bethany Church

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Do you know what the three greatest factors in a business's success are? Location, location, location! Obviously, price, product, service, and reputation are important, but they help little if one can't locate your business. A month ago, when the Minnesota Twins were blazing hot, winning nearly every game, I took the family to see them. We got to the dome two hours early. There was a special ticket package where we could watch the Twins and eat supper free. However, forty thousand people showed up and the special package had sold out. We thought we'd eat supper at the dome, and we did. Pizza was \$3 a slice, and pop was \$2 a cup. We'd never pay those prices elsewhere, but we paid them that night because of location, location, location.

If location is the dominant factor in business, what is the pivotal thing in life? Is it a positive attitude? A positive attitude is important. What about good health? Truly our health affects us profoundly. However, people with positive attitudes and good health have failed miserably and people with poor attitudes and poor health have been

blessed. There is a more basic and critical factor than attitude and health. It is relationship. One's relationship to God is more pivotal than anything else. Critical to any relationship, whether it is with your spouse, your children, your parents, friends or associates, is communication. If you don't communicate, you lose touch. The most critical act any person can do is to communicate with their creator. Nothing will affect your life and future more than prayer. No other act, constructive or destructive, carries greater consequences. What are the three most pivotal acts a person can do? Pray, pray, pray!

If you are a Bible student, you might be tempted to disagree with me. There's a story in 1 Samuel where King Saul got in trouble for praying. It was important for Abraham's descendants to seek God's favor before they went into battle. Samuel told King Saul to wait until he arrived to prepare a sacrifice on behalf of the nation, but King Saul didn't wait. The enemy armies were amassing and Israelite soldiers were deserting. When told by his army generals that he needed to do something, King Saul offered a sacrifice to God, which was an Israelite form of prayer. Before he finished, Samuel arrived and rebuked him harshly. King Saul would lose his kingdom. Would he lose it because he prayed? No, he would lose the kingdom because he didn't pray. He didn't pray and get to know and trust the God he worshiped. He put his faith in the formula of sacrifice rather than the great God who had chosen him and spoken to him through Samuel. He didn't know God. Instead, he put his faith in a formula to get on God's good side. He was a manipulator.

Prayer is not manipulation. It is communication with your creator and your heavenly father. Jesus urged us to pray not as a form of manipulation, but as an act of faith in God. Praying with faith is a pivotal act. It is pivotal because it is the only way to develop a relationship with God. Relationships depend upon trust and communication. Without trust, communication matters little. You can talk, but it won't carry weight. Many of us suffer that problem with God. We read the Bible, but we don't trust its promises. We don't trust God's word. We don't trust that God actually loves us. That's why we don't pray. We don't think it will help. We don't think prayer will change much. As a result, we don't put much time in praying. We don't wait on the Lord or wait for the Lord. Even as King Saul couldn't wait for the Lord to fulfill his word through Samuel, we don't wait. We fill our life with activity and neglect prayer. We do that even as a church. We work ourselves to the bone, hoping that God will somehow bless. Year after year, however, our expectations go unmet. As a result, our prayer time is hurried and rarely has depth. When we pray, it is a quick monologue of requests. Then we sign off. We don't expect God to talk back. Yet the Bible reveals a God who counsels and leads his people. The Bible reveals a God who does a lot of talking. Has God stopped talking or does unbelief plug our ears?

When's there's little trust, there's little communication. However, as trust grows communication grows. You talk with those you trust. The more you trust them, the more you talk with them. Indeed, communication helps you develop trust. When people communicate with love and honesty, you grow in your trust. You value their words. You ask their opinion and float ideas with them. You talk with them more and you depend on their help.

The writer of Hebrews declared:

It is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that there is a God and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him. (Hebrews 11:6)

King Saul could have cried out to God. He could have hidden his face from his generals and wept and prayed like David, “Where is your love? We are your people, God. We look to you.” God replaced King Saul with David, and you can see why in the Psalms. Many of the Psalms are written by David and they reveal that he prayed constantly and that he trusted God. He prayed with faith, believing that God is loving, merciful and just. He prayed, expecting God to answer and change the circumstance he was facing.

Jesus was a son of David by blood; and he also was a son of David in prayer. He constantly prayed. Jesus wasn’t merely a son of David in prayer. He was and is the son of God. He taught that God is our father as well. He said:

Keep on asking, and you will be given what you ask for. Keep on looking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And the door is opened to everyone who knocks. (Matthew 7:7-8)

Jesus told people to pray not because they would know God better. He told them to pray because God would respond. “For everyone who asks, receives.” Jesus cared about our situation. That’s why he wanted us to pray. He wasn’t pushing a formula to get what you want. He was pushing a relationship worthy of your trust that would provide what you need. Jesus wanted his audience to know that God is good and

trustworthy. “Will your parents give you a stone when you ask for bread?” he asked. “Will they give you a snake, if you ask for fish?” God is a good father who doesn’t give us bad things for legitimate requests. He wants to be bothered with your needs because he loves you. Therefore everyone who asks, receives.

I don’t see in Jesus’ words a formula to get rich. I don’t see in his words a heavenly bellhop, or hocus pocus. I see legitimate conversation with a God who loves you and responds to the cry of your heart.

Jesus counseled us to keep on asking, to keep on looking, and to keep on knocking. Those words imply that some answers will take time. Those words suggest that the answers will take time, and also faith. The answers require that we trust God and persist in asking, looking and knocking. The nature of life on earth is that faith and persistence are required

When we don’t pray with faith we either succumb to manipulative actions, working formulas on God, or we just don’t pray. We give up. Prayer becomes a nice thing rather than the pivotal thing.

The reason most people pray so little is that they don’t see God answering their prayers. Why come to church and pray if God won’t answer? Why gather in teams to pray if God won’t respond? Why get up early to pray, or stay up late to pray, or miss a TV show to pray, if talking to God makes little difference?

The greatest reason why some believers pray so much is that they see answers. God does all kinds of things in response to their prayers, and they see it. The challenge is

that there is an incubation period between the time of praying and the time prayer is answered. That period can be a time of real battle when it is important to keep praying.

Do you know what helped me pray? I got together with people who prayed. They didn't just pray vague prayers of blessing. They cried out asking God to supply specific needs. I spent a summer in Hawaii with Norm Hammer, a Lutheran pastor. His church founded a beach ministry, a retreat center, a nursing home and a Bible institute. Each Saturday night we leaders gathered with members of the congregation to pray and take communion. Norm would say we've got to have an offering of this amount tomorrow morning or we won't be able to make the payment on the retreat center Monday. We would cry out to our father. The next morning Norm wouldn't even mention the need to the congregation, but the exact amount prayed for would come in. I don't think Norm mentioned the needs because he the appeals would have been so frequent that people would have thought his ministry was about money. Instead, we appealed to God, and watched him answer. I learned from Norman and many others that God does answer prayer. Soon I found God answering my prayers.

You parents, have your children ever gathered together to talk with you? If they did, wouldn't you listen to them? If their concerns were legitimate, wouldn't you do your best to respond? Can you imagine the impact on God when God's children meet together to talk with him about specific issues? Can you imagine the impact when they wait for him and persist in discussing the issues? Don't you think he will respond if he sees it is that important to us? Can you see why the most pivotal action at Bethany is not our Sunday morning worship? It is Bethany at prayer. The health of this church is not

revealed in how many gather Sunday morning. It is in who and how many gather to pray on Wednesday evenings and in prayer teams throughout the week.

Praying with faith is pivotal. I can't think of anything that will have a greater impact on what you experience in the coming days. If you need faith, gather with us who are praying. You'll begin to see the answers. You will begin to see how pivotal your conversation with God is. Don't stay away. Come and pray.