

Creating an Opening for God

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Among those who believe in the power of prayer, some seem to have better results than others. Why is that? No formula exists that can force God to do what we want. God is not manipulated. But we can take steps to make us more receptive to His generosity.

Preparation and Positioning

When God is dispensing grace, we can prepare ourselves to receive it. In medieval times, during some papal processions, the pope or his officials would throw coins to the spectators, similar to favors being thrown during Mardi-Gras parades. Those who stood at the front would be in the best position to receive a coin, whereas those who lingered at the rear would be less likely to receive. I use this example to illustrate that we can determine our receptivity by how we position ourselves in relation to God. God can and does bless us, but our ability to receive and retain the blessing is up to us.

If we find ourselves in a time of spiritual drought, we believe that the drought will end and that God will eventually send rain to our souls. When the rains come, we will gladly soak up what we can, but the wise person will build a cistern to catch the rainwater. That person will have prepared for the rains and be able to receive a greater measure of blessing. The spiritual equivalent of building a cistern is to create a wide space or opening within our souls for God to fill. We can't predict God's timing, but we can make ourselves ready and open for when the time does come.

A Story of Healing

When I lived in San Luis Obispo, California, I met a lady, Alice, who had MCS (Multiple Chemical Sensitivity). She had just moved from Los Angeles because her environment was making her sick. She needed to move to a more chemical-free setting. Her body had lost its ability to expel toxins, so they had accumulated in her system. The level of arsenic in her hair was fifty times the acceptable limit.

The change in setting helped her somewhat, but over time she became extremely ill, confined to a wheelchair, and hooked up to oxygen. In those days, the doctors didn't believe in MCS and thought she was making it up. A friend relayed to me that Alice had attended a healing service. The minister prayed for her and she was miraculously healed, threw off her oxygen, and got out of her wheelchair. She now travels to educate others about MCS and works as an advocate for those with the disease.

I find this story interesting for three reasons. First, God waited until Alice was at her weakest state before He healed her. Second, God chose to heal her when so many others struggle with MCS for the remainder of their lives. Third, if Alice hadn't attended the healing service, would God have healed her anyway? From my perspective, I consider her attendance at the service as an act of faith. Perhaps she thought that if God could heal or would heal, she wanted to be in the front row to receive it—as wheelchairs often are. She had positioned herself to receive, both spiritually and physically.

Receptivity

Each of us has a unique receptivity to God. If you volunteered at a hospital ward and went from room to room to cheer up the patients, you would meet all types of people. Some people are suspicious or apathetic or resistant or simply closed down. We can be the same way with God. If God were intending to give us something, we would do well to be as receptive as we can. I can think of five attitudes that make us more receptive to God: trust, surrender, openness, thankfulness, and anticipation.

I left out faith on purpose. I believe that most of the time, faith trips us up, primarily because we don't understand it. We get in trouble when we confuse faith with expectation. If we expect God to do something for us, then we have shifted our faith from God onto the thing expected, a precarious situation where God is on the line to deliver and at risk of failing us. The faith of many

has been destroyed because of unmet and wrongly-placed expectations on God. Our faith is best placed in God alone, not in hoped-for outcomes. Our faith and trust is in God and in His love for us. Period. That ought to cover everything else.

Trust

Let's examine the five attitudes that make us more receptive to God. The first is trust. Trust is a confidence we place in God to carry us through the challenges of life. We rely on His mercy and goodness, knowing that life is unpredictable. Trust makes us open to God because we are "leaning" on Him to prop us up, especially when life knocks us down. Trust is a reliance on God that surpasses a reliance on oneself. It is a conscious dependence on God. We choose to entrust our lives to God's care.

Surrender

Surrender is second and more difficult. Surrender is letting go of one's ego and personal demands in exchange for reliance on God. We give up control over our own lives. We divest ourselves of everything we are holding on to and hand those things to God, allowing Him to do with them as He wills. Some things He returns to us. Some things He purges. In all things, He acts according to what best serves us in the long term. We learn to have a loose grip on everything. Surrender is our will "bowing" to His will. We choose to entrust our lives to God's will.

Openness

Openness is third. Openness is a non-resistant posture toward God. We make ourselves open to whatever God has for us, whether pleasant or painful. We choose to not filter or resist what God sends our way, but give Him permission to be active in our lives in any way He sees fit. It's an "openhandedness" toward God, a willingness to say "yes" to God no matter

what. Surrender is releasing one's ego to create a space for God. Openness is an attitude of keeping that space continually open for God to fill. We choose to entrust our lives to God's activity.

Gratitude

Gratitude is fourth. Thankfulness keeps us positive by encouraging us to look for and recognize the good in our lives. It turns our focus off of our problems and onto God. It also keeps us humble. It's a spiritual posture of "kneeling" where we acknowledge our dependence on God and we express our gratitude for His blessings, whether abundant or sparse. We recognize that any good in our lives comes from God and is due to His kindness toward us. It makes us open to God because it keeps our focus on Him when life's problems beset us. As we cultivate gratitude, we learn that we can even be thankful for challenges in our lives because we see them as opportunities to grow in spiritual maturity and as lessons to teach us about God or ourselves. We choose to be thankful for what our lives contain.

Anticipation

Last is anticipation. This is an attitude of eagerness and excitement about the future, believing that God has blessings in store for us. I envision a child standing in line waiting to meet Santa at the mall, full of excitement and anticipation. This would be a spiritual posture of "upraised hands." It's a childlike attitude of expectancy, believing that good will come our way, that God will bless us, that the best of what God has to offer is yet to come. This anticipation is untainted and untethered from our current circumstances and tied to a belief in God's unconditional goodness toward us. It's not the same as expectation where we have a certain outcome in mind. Instead, it is an attitude of hopefulness in God and not in a specific result or timeframe. We choose to entrust our futures to God.

The Widest Opening

These five attitudes create the widest opening possible for us to receive from God. They make us the most receptive so that when the time is right, we are in the best position to receive the fullness of what God might give us. Our spiritual posture before God is important. To review, the spiritual postures of leaning, bowing, kneeling, openhandedness, and upraised hands all convey openness and humility toward God. A closed posture will diminish our capacity to receive. God's timing is unpredictable, so we always maintain an open posture so we don't miss the opportunity when it comes our way. God wants to bless us and He wants us to receive the fullness of those blessings. It pains Him when we aren't in a position to receive them because of our pride, unbelief, or negativity.

Questions for Reflection:

1. On a scale of zero to ten, how would you rate your level of receptivity to God? Do you believe it's possible for you to be more receptive? If not, why do you believe you are stuck?
2. Which of the five attitudes do you struggle with most? Why?
3. What spiritual practice would help you most to cultivate a greater openness to God?
4. What thought patterns make it hardest for you to be open to God? What thoughts would be a good replacement for those?

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