



Today we're starting a new series called ***Direct Message***. Even though most of us are stuck home, we have a multitude of ways to communicate with our friends and loved ones. We can use social media, instant/direct messages, texts, phones and video calls, and we even have the option to write letters. Some of these methods we have to reach out to our friends and family provide us with instant gratification such as direct messages (phone, text, or instant messages online) that allow us to communicate with each other fast and in the moment. Other methods of communication take time, such as sending a letter or card.

Discussion/Questions:

Where do you think prayer falls on this list of communication options? Is it fast and instant or does it require time and patience? Why do you say that?

If you don't pray, what keeps you from praying?

If you do or were to pray, what are some things you would pray about?

Why do you think praying to God is important in our lives?

Prayer can be difficult to understand and implement in our lives. It can be a struggle to be honest and vulnerable about what's really going on. Or, maybe we don't really pray at all because it doesn't feel like it's a direct message to anything or anyone, even though we wish it did. We don't pray because when we do, it feels like God is leaving us on "read."

In fact, for a lot of us, prayer can feel like eating broccoli; we know we should, but are the benefits really worth the effort? (Because let's be honest: We tend to *only* do things that we know will benefit us!)

For some of you, the benefit of prayer may be obvious . . .

Maybe in the past, God showed up and answered your prayers in a big way. On the other hand, I bet many of you had a time in your life when you decided to pray but all you got was crickets. And now, prayer doesn't seem all that important. **It would be a different story if you got what you wanted. But since you didn't, prayer just isn't something you think about that much.** It didn't "work."

- Maybe you tried to pray several times when the stakes were high, but God didn't seem to hold up His end of the bargain.
- Maybe you wanted to make the team, but after days of praying about it, you still got cut.
- Maybe you did something you really regretted. And you prayed that you wouldn't get caught. But you did, and now you're in huge trouble.

When we treat prayer like it's our last option or like it's some type of magical solution to our problems—and it doesn't give us the results we want—it's frustrating. But more than that, it makes us think that prayer isn't doing what it was meant to do, so we stop altogether.

But what if the problem isn't prayer? **What if the problem is the way we *think* about prayer?** What if we're missing the point?

The only way to really know is to figure out the true point of prayer. **If it's not just about getting what we want or having a quick solution to our problems, then what's the point?**

Well thankfully, we have some really good advice when it comes to what we should think about prayer. There are plenty of people throughout history that seemed to be able to connect to God through prayer in a *very real* way. In fact, there is one person in particular who probably gave us the best advice out there.

If anyone could teach us something about what prayer should actually be, it's Jesus.

Now, maybe you've never really thought about it before, but the fact that we have records of Jesus' life is pretty amazing. We have record of what He taught and who He spent His time around.

Even more amazing, we have Jesus' family drama! You may not know it, but Jesus had a brother, and his name was James. And while Jesus was teaching and gaining a bunch of followers, James was *not* one of them. Which makes sense. They were brothers. What would your brother have to do to prove he was the Son of God?

So James wasn't exactly a fan. But then Jesus was killed and—plot twist—came back to life! After that, James knew there was no way to get around it. Brother or not, it was obvious that Jesus was the Son of God.

Later, James wrote a letter to new Jesus followers. In his letter, he says something that can help us get a better understanding of the point of prayer:

“Come near to God and he will come near to you” (James 4:8a NIV).

In this verse, James is introducing a brand new way for us to interact with God. For all of us who have been practicing a pattern of prayer that has left us dissatisfied or skeptical, James is about to change the game. He is basically saying . . . *“Hey, prayer isn't what you think”*

A lot of times, we just talk to God and tell him what we want and how we would like things in our life to work out. It's like talking into a megaphone and waiting for God to do what we asked. But prayer is more like communicating through a cell phone.

“The point isn't to communicate what you want so you can get it. The point is to connect.”

Think about how you've seen someone use a megaphone. Someone shouts what they want to say, and that's it. Their point is to simply communicate their message. And then they're done.

Now, think about how you use a cell phone. You call someone. You text someone. You DM someone. And then what do you do? You *wait*. **What do you wait for? You wait for them to respond.**

Sounds nice, right? But you've probably talked to God and gotten nothing in response. So let's go back to James. If we can trust Jesus' brother, then we can know that when we come close to God, He will come close to us.

The key for us is to make sure we have the right expectations of what James meant when he said God comes near. **If we're not careful, we might actually wind up narrowing prayer down to what we think it should be instead of what God wants us to experience.** We can start to believe that unless God does what we asked, He hasn't come close. Which means...

- God hasn't heard us.
- Our prayers haven't worked.
- Let's hit END on the call before God has a chance to respond.

But James isn't the only person to talk about prayer in a surprising way. In the Old Testament, a guy named David, who was king of Israel and known as a "man after God's own heart," made this statement:

"The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth" (Psalm 145:18 NIV).

David, just like James, seemed to think that prayer was a little more than just shouting our requests to God. For both of them, the point wasn't just about communicating our requests and waiting to get what you want. **It was about confidence in God being close to us and connecting with us when we pray.**

This perspective makes prayer less like a megaphone and more like a cell phone.

And look, maybe that freaks you out a bit because you're afraid of what God might say back to you. Maybe you think God has been angry with you, so waiting around to connect is actually terrifying.

If that's how you think God thinks of you, then of course the idea of connecting with God is a little stressful. But you need to hear this: God isn't mad at you. **When you call out to Him, like David says, and come near to Him, like James says, what you aren't going to get is a mean, angry, and bitter God.** You're going to get a God who wants a relationship with you more than anything else. God loves you and wants what's best for you, and He will stop at nothing to make sure you know just how much He likes you!

And if that's true, doesn't that make the idea of prayer sound a lot better?

Just to be clear, changing our perspective on prayer doesn't mean we stop asking God for things. That's definitely still a part of it. But I want you to understand that prayer is more than that. When we ask for God to heal someone and He doesn't, we shouldn't just give up on praying. It doesn't mean praying didn't work. It means that we didn't get what we wanted, but God can still be close when you tell Him how sad, frustrated, or angry about how things turned out. Think about it this way:

Prayer is about *connecting*, not just *getting*.

When we keep that in mind, a couple of things will happen:

1. **We'll be less afraid of prayer.** We'll remember that God loves us and is for us.
2. **We'll feel less pressure.** If prayer is about connecting and not just getting what we want, that means we can't do it wrong. We can't say the wrong things or use the wrong words. When we show up exactly as we are, like James and David said, God is near.

For those of you who have stopped praying, I want to ask you to give it another shot.

Trust James when he says that God will come near to you when you come near to Him. Simply begin to talk to God again—pick up the phone and have a conversation.

For others of you who have been praying for a while, I want you to add *listening to part of your prayer habit*. Maybe you've been talking through a megaphone for years and haven't heard anything back. Try listening.

God most likely won't talk to you in an audible voice. (That would be scary!) But there are other ways we "listen" for God. There's one way in particular that can be helpful. It is called a "prayer pattern."

Think of your prayer pattern like a treasure map. If you were told to go out and look for treasure, you'd do it. (Because, who doesn't love treasure?) But you wouldn't know where to look. But if you were given a treasure *map*, it would keep you on track and eventually you'd be able to find what you're looking for.

Prayer patterns work the same way.

Here are some great ways to start your prayer pattern.

- **Write your prayers and then read them out loud to God.** This helps your mind stay focused on prayer. This is also a really easy way to keep track of what you have been praying. You can look back at your pattern and see how God has come near to you. When you look back at what God has done—whether it was through circumstances changing or *you* changing—you're actually "listening" to God by taking time to consider what He's been up to in your life.
- **Be intentional about taking a literal break from talking.** Choose to spend time quietly listening instead. Again, you're not listening for a voice you can hear, but for what God may be saying quietly to your heart.

No matter what you decide to do to begin to develop your prayer pattern, there is one important thing to remember:

Listen.

Learning to listen is a huge part of connecting with God. But don't overcomplicate what this means. **God can speak to you in a bunch of different ways.** He can speak through your small group leader, your parents, an event, music, Scripture, or even just in the silence of your quiet time. You can trust that no matter how He speaks to you, He will tell you the things He wants you to know. Because prayer is about *connecting*, not just *getting*.

As this lesson concludes, I want you to know God loves you and wants nothing more than to come near to you and connect with you. God is for you, and prayer is for you to connect with a God who wants what is best for you.

As you head to your this next week, think about this question:

What do you need to do to begin treating prayer more like a cell phone instead of a megaphone?

This week we talked about figuring out your own prayer pattern. Pick one way you can start a new prayer pattern this week:

- a. Write your prayers down and read them out loud to God.
- b. Be intentional about taking a literal break from talking.
- c. If you never tried praying before, invite someone to pray with you until you are comfortable praying by yourself.

However, you decide to pray, please keep praying... God wants to hear from you and have a relationship with you. You are never alone, because God is always with us.