

BECOMING IN PRAYER

Listening Prayer

This guide will help your community grow together and know how to practice “Listening Prayer.” We recommend reading this out loud together and then interacting around the discussion questions. The individual practice is meant for each person to try on their own some other time during the week and is crucial to not just “learning” but “attaching” to God through prayer.

This discussion complements the January 15 sermon on “Listening Prayer” and we recommend that sermon as a starting point. If members of your group missed that sermon, this guide is still designed to be helpful and they can engage with it, but we would also encourage them to go back and listen to that sermon.

Read Together

God is speaking all the time. The practice of “listening prayer” helps lead us into God’s presence so we can be present with and hear from Him. As his children, we long to hear His words to us and understand His heart for us, but we may have trouble hearing Him because we don’t exactly know what we’re listening for. Or, if we do hear Him, we’re not sure if we should trust what we hear.

Our ability to hear God clearly or correctly can depend on the posture of our hearts. If we doubt it’s possible to have a two-way relationship with God then we won’t come to Him with an open heart that is ready to connect with the presence of our Father, with Jesus our Redeemer, and with the power of the Holy Spirit. Our doubts and fears can make us unable to hear or unwilling to submit to God’s voice. This ambivalence can drown out His voice because we may be too afraid of hearing a stern rebuke or of what He might ask of us. Instead of imagining God delights in us, we assume He is displeased or disinterested. When we come to God expectant and ready to receive, we find that He is there ready to receive us as well.

Jesus tells His disciples,

“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.” (John 10:14-15, 27)

Jesus reveals that the Father's intent for us is that we personally know Him, not just things about Him. And to know Him is to hear His voice. This is the foundation of the Christian life; we are to know him, "... just as the Father knows me and I know the Father." Jesus's words invite us to know him in a way that is similar to the way the Father and the Son and the Spirit know one another. Relational nearness. Deep knowing. Constant communion. Listening and speaking. These can be the trademark characteristics of our relationship with Jesus too. Knowing our Bibles, studying theology, and adhering to right doctrine are important, but only to the extent that they lead us to better know and love God in real relationship.

Jesus teaches that knowing leads to hearing; his sheep listen to His voice. He has given us the Holy Spirit as the means by which He speaks. When Jesus ascended to heaven, He gave us the Holy Spirit as our Helper to lead us into all truth (Jn 16:13). God wants to tell us He loves us (John 15), to teach us (Psalm 143:8), to encourage us (Romans 8:31), and to remind us who we are and whose we are (Eph 1:3-6). Sometimes, the Spirit also has a word of rebuke or conviction, but it's accompanied by a reminder that He loves us and will help us. Rather than leading to shame or fear, it leads to real repentance and rest in His love. God is creative in the ways and means of communicating with us, however it can be difficult to parse out what is God's voice and what is not. The scriptures are full of examples of God speaking to his people in a variety of ways:

- a particular scripture coming to mind (Acts 1:20; Acts 13:16ff)
- a picture or vision (Acts 10:11-17; Acts 16:9-10)
- a dream (Daniel 4:4-17; Daniel 7:1-14)
- an interpretation of a dream or vision (Daniel 4:18-27; Daniel 7:15-27)
- a picture or impression of a word (Acts 10:3ff)
- a sensation or pain in one's body (Acts 9:8-9)
- a spiritual song (Acts 16:25; Ephesians 5:19)
- divinely sent messengers or angels (Acts 1:9-11; Acts 8:26) (Philip is told to go south to Gaza—that's all—but along the way he bumps into a seeker, and it's obvious to Philip this is the reason he was told to come.)
- signs and wonders (Luke 23:44-45; Acts 5:18-21; Acts 9:36-42; Acts 12:6-11)
- restriction of movement and speech (Acts 16:6-8)

How do I discern God's voice from other "voices" in my life?

As you practice listening prayer, you'll want to test what you hear both biblically and in community. Ask yourself these two questions:

- Biblically: Does what I heard agree with what the Bible teaches?
- In Community: Do other Christians who know my story affirm what I heard?

The Holy Spirit is the divine author of the Bible and He will never contradict Himself by saying something that goes against the clear teaching of the Bible. It's also important to test what we hear in community. If you think you heard something from the Holy Spirit, share it with a mature Christian friend who knows your story (someone in your community is a great place to start). Ask them for their prayerful discernment and if they think this could be from the Holy Spirit.

Also important to discerning God's voice is understanding the difference between conviction and condemnation. We need to be able to differentiate between the voice of the Holy Spirit and the voice of Satan. The voice of the Holy Spirit will sound like encouragement and the conviction of sin will feel more like good news, not condemnation. It will be a conviction that produces agency in us, not fear. Negative or fearful thoughts like shame, despair, and judgment are not of God. When we hear those thoughts or feel those feelings we need to reject them as unholy lies.

God communicates with us because He deeply loves us and wants to form us into the image of His Son. Like a good dad, He is eager to listen and respond. The practice of listening to God in prayer is a powerful way to begin receiving His love.

Community Discussion Questions

1. Do you feel confident that God is happy to listen to your prayer? Do you ever feel like God is annoyed by your prayer, burdened by you, disappointed, or too busy to listen?
2. What do you think has shaped that view of how God hears your prayer?
3. What is your comfort level with intimate relationships where you are fully known by someone else? Do you find it difficult to be vulnerable? How do you think that shapes your relationship with God?
4. How do you typically experience God communicating with you? What has shaped you the most in this?
5. How do we discern what we hear to know if it is God's voice or not?
6. Was there a time you thought you heard from God, but later you weren't so sure? What was that like for you?

Close your time highlighting the at-home individual practice and encourage everyone to try this at home this week. This is probably the most important part of the growth process. Just "learning" about prayer won't produce change in us...we have to practice prayer as a way of attaching ourselves to Jesus.

At-Home Individual Practice

A biblical model of prayer involves both speaking and listening. Unfortunately, we're often more comfortable speaking than listening. Our relationship with God requires that we make space not only to speak to Him, but also listen to Him. One way to grow in listening to God is through the practice of Listening Prayer. This kind of prayer helps us develop a posture of listening to the Holy Spirit and cultivates an ongoing awareness of the Holy Spirit's speaking and leading presence.

Try Practicing Listening Prayer

1. **Find a quiet spot.**
2. **Turn off the noise:** Put away your phone, turn off the external noise, take a few deep breaths to quiet yourself, and acknowledge that God is with you.
3. **Pray a "Centering Prayer"** that will help you settle and center yourself to be present with God. Take deep breaths. Slowly, breathe in and breathe out. As you breathe in, pray "Abba, Father." As you breathe out, pray, "I belong to you." Another centering prayer you can try is: "Be still and know that He is God."
4. **Invite God to speak to you:** "Father, is there anything you want to encourage me in right now?"
5. **Listen:** Take 5 or so minutes and stop and listen.

During this time a Bible verse, thought, or a picture might come to mind. You may be unsure if it's from the Holy Spirit. Be open-handed with what you hear and test it (more on that below). Or you may not hear anything at all. That's okay. God may just want to be with you in the silence. Have patience with yourself; you're building a spiritual muscle and it will take time.

After you've spent 5 or so minutes listening, when you feel ready, pause and thank God for being with you in this moment. If you didn't hear anything, that's okay! The Father was still happy to be with you. If you did, take some time to write that down and ask God for discernment. Then, test what you hear.

If you're new to listening prayer, it will be helpful to focus on asking God for encouragement rather than asking for predictive or directive words from God. God does speak that way, but it's important to know how to discern His voice and also to test what you hear.

Test what you hear.

As you learn to discern God's voice, it will be important to test what you hear in the Scriptures and in Community.

- In the Scriptures: Does what I heard agree with what the Bible teaches? God never contradicts His written Word.
- In Community: Do other Christians who know my story affirm what I heard? Who do I need to talk with and ask for help discerning what I've heard?