

# INTRODUCTION TO LISTENING PRAYER

*Prayer practice that helps us quiet our whole selves to hear from God, as we embrace prayer as dialogue rather than a monologue.*

## PART 1 – VISION FOR SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

It is our prayer for Citizens that we would be abiding missionaries — that we would know how dearly loved we are by God and remain (abide) in his love throughout our days. Then, from a place of deep restedness in God's love, that we would be motivated to share the good news of his love in word and deed with our friends, neighbors, and coworkers.

Spiritual practices to help us to do that — to make our home in the love of God. As a church and as a community, we are collectively engaging in several spiritual practices this year. This quarter, we are focusing on Prayer as a practice to help us be with Jesus.

## PART 2 - PRAYER

The foundation of our discipleship is being with Jesus. We can do nothing apart from Jesus (John 15) and so we must learn to be with Jesus throughout our days, to make our home in his love. Central to being with Jesus is prayer. That's why Paul invites us to, "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). What does that mean? It means to live in a constant state of connection to and awareness of God.

The problem is that we often don't do that. How do we make progress towards this goal? It takes practice. Dallas Willard writes:

“The first and most basic thing we can and must do is to keep God before our minds. This is *the* fundamental secret of caring for our souls. Our part in thus practicing the presence of God is to direct and redirect our minds constantly to Him. In the early time of our ‘practicing’ we may well be challenged by our burdensome habits of dwelling on things less than God. But these are habits—not the law of gravity—and can be broken. A new, grace-filled habit will replace the former ones as we take intentional steps toward keeping God before us. Soon our minds will return to God as the needle of a compass constantly returns to the north. If God is the great longing of our souls, He will become the pole star of our inward beings.”

### **PART 3 - LISTENING PRAYER**

#### **READ: JOHN 10:14-16, 27**

“I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice... My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.”

#### **READ: JOHN 16:7, 12-13a**

“Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak...”

*A pastoral reflection from Adam*

In the first passage above, Jesus describes Himself the Good Shepherd and us as His sheep. He tells us that His sheep hear His voice and they *listen* to it.

Jesus' sheep don't just know about Him conceptually, they know Him personally and can pick out His voice in a crowd. Jesus' sheep are well acquainted with His tender voice.

Do you know Jesus like that? Do you want to know Jesus like that?

You can. How? Through the Holy Spirit.

In the second passage above, Jesus as He's preparing to return to heaven tells His disciples concerning the Holy Spirit, "...it is *to your advantage* that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you."

Think about how amazing it would be for Jesus to be in this room in person. According to Jesus, that would be a *disadvantage* to us. According to Jesus, it is better for us to have the Holy Spirit dwelling in us than Jesus physically dwelling with us. Stop and think about that.

If you follow Jesus, God dwells *in* you through the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead, *in* you.

The Spirit that inspired the Scriptures, *in* you.

The Spirit that filled the holy of holies, *in* you.

The Spirit that hovered over the face of the waters at creation, *in* you.

The Spirit that empowered all of Jesus' ministry, *in* you.

That Spirit wants to speak to you, today.

He wants to speak to you through the Bible.

And He wants to speak to you personally.

It can be as simple as asking the question, "Holy Spirit, what do you want to say to encourage me right now?" And then taking a couple minutes to listen.

In the Gospel accounts we get to see firsthand what it was like for the perfect human, Jesus, to listen to the voice of the Father. The majority of the time Jesus hears his Father speak inaudibly and internally by the Spirit. Why is that? We don't know for sure, but it certainly does show us that this was normal for Jesus, and that it can, therefore, be normal for his followers.

We often express our prayers out loud to the Father, yet hear the response silently in our minds as God's thoughts mingle with our thoughts. While prayer at its best is a dialogue like this, we often settle for a monologue.

The practice of listening prayer is simple, and it has the potential to shape how we engage with God in all of life. Taking a few minutes to stop and proactively listen to God can help us cultivate an ongoing awareness of the Holy Spirit's speaking and leading in the everyday rhythms of our work, rest, and play.

Here's a simple way to practice listening prayer:

1. Pray a simple prayer like, "Holy Spirit, is there anything that you want to say to encourage me right now?"
2. Stop and listen for a couple minutes.
3. Test what you hear by the Scriptures and hold it open-handedly.

## **Keep it encouraging!**

If listening prayer is a new practice for you, start by asking the Holy Spirit for encouragement. This provides a safe space to grow in your confidence in listening to the Holy Spirit. Avoid asking the Holy Spirit for anything that is:

- Predictive – anything concerning the future
- Directive – how to make a decision
- Corrective – something you should start or stop doing

The Holy Spirit does speak in these ways, but they can also be areas where lies or gospel distortions can lead to confusion, so it's best not to start there, especially if this is a newer practice for you,

## **Test it!**

As you practice listening prayer, it's ok if you aren't sure if what you heard is from God. God may speak in familiar ways like bringing a Bible verse to mind, or less familiar ways like a picture or a thought that He brings to mind. Just hold what you hear open-handedly and test what you hear biblically. You can ask yourself these 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 can also be helpful 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 in your community. Ask them their impressions in light of your story and if they think it could be from the Holy Spirit.

## **Conviction vs. Condemnation**

When we engage listening prayer, we need to be able to differentiate between the voice of the Holy Spirit and the voice of the evil one. The voice of the Holy Spirit will sound like encouragement and the gentle conviction of sin. If there's conviction, it will be a conviction that produces agency in us, not fear. Negative thoughts like toxic shame, despair, and self-hatred are not of God. If we hear those thoughts or feel those feelings we need to reject them as unholy lies. Talk to a pastor or leader if you sense condemnation when you engage in listening prayer.

The living God is speaking to us by His Spirit. Are we listening?