

Why We Hate to Pray

#1—Personally

Introduction:

You might be wondering why I titled this two week series, “Why We Hate to Pray.” How many of would say, “I hate to pray.” See—no one! I’m not surprised. Who in their right mind would say that they hate to pray? Especially in church!

A recent Pew Research survey revealed that 55% of Americans say they pray every day! Evidently, there is a lot of prayer going on! It doesn’t sound like we hate to pray at all! So what in the world was I thinking?

Another question: How many of you wish you prayed more? Most of us believe we should pray more than we do—so why don’t we? What keeps us from praying more? I think that when we enjoy something, we tend to do it a lot. I enjoy eating—I do it every day. I enjoy golf—I play every chance I get. Do you enjoy praying? If you don’t, I’ll bet you don’t do it that much. What if I could show you a way to pray that is natural, rewarding, even fun? That’s what we’re going to talk about today.

So here’s:

The Big Idea: God wants a conversational relationship with you! Make your life one long prayer!

I want you to think differently about prayer—that it’s not an occasional activity but a lifestyle, an all-day ongoing conversation with God. God wants a conversational relationship with you.

I was struck on Tuesday in our Bible reading plan by the interaction between God and Moses at the burning bush. It’s found in Exodus 3-4 (p. 49). God called Moses by name (3:4) and told him what He was planning to do (3:7-10). Moses started asking questions and raising objections (3:11-4:17). God patiently answered each question or objection. They had a conversation! Notice a couple things about this conversation.

First, God initiated it. God started the conversation! Prayer is a response to God's initiative. Prayer is entering into the ongoing conversation that God starts. I believe that God is speaking to us all day long, inviting us into the conversation. Much of the time, we're oblivious! How different would your prayers be if you were aware of God's initiative and were responding to Him? God wants a conversational relationship with you.

Second, God did most of the talking, and Moses did most of the listening. This is opposite how most of us pray. We check in with God, make a speech, and check out with an amen. It's a monologue, not a dialogue, and we're doing all the talking. How different would your prayers be if you listened more than you talked? God wants a conversational relationship with you.

Third, Moses asked God questions and waited for God's answer. Again, this is opposite how most of us pray. We tell God what we want—and when we're done with one request, we move on to the next, rarely waiting for a reply. How different would your prayers be if you told God less and asked God more questions and gave Him a chance to reply? God wants a conversational relationship with you.

Prayer is not an occasional ritual but a living conversation. We don't just say prayers—we live in prayer. We live in ongoing conversation with God—listening, responding.

St. Augustine wrote his famous autobiography, *The Confessions*, one of the most influential books of all time, in 397-400 AD. Remarkably, the entire book is written as a prayer. Augustine addressed his life-story to God! Augustine saw his life as one long prayer—God taking the initiative and pursuing him, Augustine at first resisting, then responding.

This changed the way I thought about my life and about prayer. Make your life one long prayer!

God wants a conversational relationship with you. This is the Big Idea I'd like you take home. It's a radically different view of prayer—from something we do occasionally to all-day-long ongoing conversation with God. He wants a conversational relationship with you. If you understand that, it changes everything. Prayer ceases to be a duty, and becomes a delight—a joy.

On Tuesday evening, I was driving here for the Rooted Launch night. As I drove, God and I had a conversation. I brought up to him something that I've prayed about a lot lately—with no results. But I did something different. After telling God what I wanted (for the umpteenth time), I asked him about this situation: "What's going on? What are You doing?" And He said something to me that blew my mind. I didn't hear an audible voice, but words, an idea, jumped to my mind—something that I had never thought of before, something that completely changed the way I was approaching that situation. I was so jacked that I spent the last few minutes of the drive thanking and praising Him! The difference: instead of me making a speech and telling God what I wanted, we had a conversation.

With the time we have left, I want to tell you why we hate to pray—why our wrong notions about prayer have left us prayer-less and dissatisfied. I'm going to name some of the problems, and then point us back to this big idea: "prayer is a conversation between two persons who love each other."^[1] Here are the reasons why we hate to pray—and what we can do about it.

Why we hate to pray.

1. I don't know how to pray.

This is particularly true if you are new to Jesus but even for many of you high mileage units! I remember as a new Christian, I had no idea how to pray. I would kneel by my bed at night and feel lost.

Think about this: how did you learn how to talk? From the moment you were born, your parents started speaking to you. At first, you were clueless. Then you associated the sound of one voice with food. Slowly you began to learn words—first word is usually, "no." Then a few more words, and finally, you learned to string words together in a sentence, when you were about 22. In other words, you learned to talk by observing others talking.

Most of us learned to pray in the same way—by watching and listening to others pray. Unfortunately, we also tend to pick up some bad habits along the way.

As a new Christian I learned to pray by listening to the prayers that were said in our church. One leader would say beautiful flowery prayers. “Our gracious and loving Heavenly Father, as thou drawest the shades on another day and wrappest thy loving arms around us, we approach thy throne of grace with confidence in thy almighty mercy.” I’d kneel by my bed and try to pray like that—but my 13 year-old brain didn’t work like that. I stumbled and stuttered and felt awkward and silly.

What I learned from listening to prayers at church was that there was a holy language and holy tones of voice to pray and I didn’t know them. I didn’t know how to pray.

Then a friend came to my rescue. He gave me a book by Rosalind Rinker, *Prayer: Conversing with God*. Ros taught me that prayer is a conversation between two persons to love each other. She taught me that I don’t need special words, or King James English, or a holy tone of voice—that God just wants me to be myself and have a conversation with Him. Talk with Him like I would a friend. It set me free, and suddenly, prayer felt natural, honest—enjoyable. It turns out that’s what Jesus said too!

In Luke 11:1-13 (p. 892), Jesus is praying, and His disciples ask, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.” Lord, teach us to pray. That’s a good prayer—and one that He will answer. I pray it often. “Lord, teach us to pray.” And Jesus did. He gave them what we call the Lord’s prayer (read v. 2-4 together). The first thing you should notice is that this prayer is short, simple and natural. A child can pray this. “Lord, teach us to pray.” Jesus says, “It’s this simple.”

Then Jesus told them a story (5-8) that God is a friend who will happily hear their prayers and respond—so ask, seek and knock (9-10). And God is a father (11-13) who is more generous than any earthly father. Think about that. “Lord, teach us to pray,” and He gives them a simple prayer and reminds them that God is their Friend and their Father.

Don’t know how to pray? Keep it simple and have a conversation with your Friend and your Father who loves you. God wants a conversational relationship with you.

#2—I hate to pray because...

2. I think prayer is making speeches to God.

What is the number one fear in America? Public speaking. Most of us hate to make speeches. We're not good at it! And that's what we think prayer is: making speeches to God. No wonder we hate to pray!

Where did we get this idea that prayer is making speeches to God? We learn to pray by hearing others pray and it's what we have had modeled for us. Most churches have a pastoral prayer in their service—the pastor makes a speech to God on behalf of the whole church. I'm not saying it's wrong—in fact, we'll see that there is biblical precedence for it. I'm just saying that for many of us, the only prayers we see modeled are this kind: making speeches to God.

I was talking with my mom last week; they had a guest preacher at their church, and he gave a 45 minute prayer! Then he gave an hour long sermon! My mom said they won't invite him back.

I'll bet that most of the prayers you've heard have not been conversations with God, but speeches to God. It's all we know.

As I said, there are prayers in the Bible that are speeches to God. Look at 1 Kings 8:22 (p. 293). You'll see that this is King Solomon's prayer of dedication at the new temple he's built. The prayer runs from v. 23-53. Solomon prays a long and beautiful prayer to God—it's a speech to God, but he's praying as the representative of the people. And there's the catch. When you and I pray alone, we're not trying to represent a whole group of people—we're just trying to talk with God. But we're using this "make a speech" model.

When I was in college at the preacher factory, I took a class called "Public Worship." It was all about running church services, and one of the elements we were to master was the pastoral prayer. After all our reading and lectures, our assignment was to write a pastoral prayer—about one page long. I poured my heart into it...and got a C! A C! I was so upset! It was an honest, heartfelt prayer—I don't think God gave me a C. But isn't that what we worry about when we give a speech? It won't be received. It will fall flat. It will be a C.

This is why public speaking is the number one fear in America. We're afraid of failure. If prayer is making speeches to God, no wonder we hate to pray.

Which would you rather do: have a conversation with a friend, or make a speech to God? God wants a conversational relationship with you.

#3—I hate to pray because...

3. I'm easily distracted.

My mind wanders. How many of you have wandering minds right now? Here's what happens to me: I start to talk with God, and my mind wanders all over the place. For a long time, I felt guilty. I would apologize and try to get my mind "back on track." I felt like a failure as a pray-er.

Then I learned that prayer is a conversation between two persons who love each other. Let me ask you: what happens when you're talking with a friend and your mind wanders to another subject? One of two things. First, you talk about that subject. "Hey, I was just thinking..." This is how conversations naturally flow from one subject to another. Or second, if the subject is inappropriate (I don't mean necessarily bad, but just not something your friend would be interested in, not fitting), you just let it go and re-focus.

So here you are praying, and your mind wanders. What should you do? Does God know where your mind wandered? Yep. So just go ahead and make that part of the conversation. "Look at what I was just thinking Lord. What do You think about that? What would You like to say to me?" And here's the cool thing: there are no inappropriate subjects with God. He wants to talk with you about all of it—the good, the bad and the ugly. I talk with Him about my happy thoughts and my concerns, but also my greedy thoughts, my angry thoughts, my selfish thoughts. He already knows them, so rather than pretending and covering them up, we just talk about them.

When your mind wanders somewhere, it's usually to what you're worried about or care about. Make it part of the conversation.

If your wandering mind makes you feel like a prayer failure, you'll probably hate praying. But Wandering minds make for interesting conversations. And God wants a conversational relationship with you.

#4—I hate to pray because...

4. I don't know what to pray about.

I start talking with God and I run out of material after a couple moments. Anybody else? I remember the first time I tried to pray for an hour. I prayed my heart out—everything I could think of—and checked my watch. 7 minutes. Once again, I'm a prayer failure—and no one likes to fail. Been there, done that, flopped, don't want to do it again.

If this is you, I've got something for you. Let's look at Romans 8:26-27 (p. 972). In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. 27 And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.

"We don't know what we ought to pray for." That's me. Sometimes I'm clueless. But the good news is the Spirit helps us in our weakness. He intercedes for us. This could mean several things, and one of them is simply that the Spirit comes alongside us and helps us when we don't know what to pray about. He brings to our mind what to pray for.

This is consistent with the idea that prayer is a conversation between two persons who love each other. Have you ever been in a conversation with a friend and you run out of things to say? What happens? Usually, your friend brings up something. God is our friend, and when we don't know what to pray about, He does, and He happily helps us. Practically, it means that I often ask the Holy Spirit to help me pray, and then listen for what He brings to mind.

Have you ever asked God, "What do You want to talk about today?" Try it—see where He leads the conversation.

Here's another one: Philippians 4:6-7 (p. 1013). Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Don't be anxious, don't worry about anything, but pray about everything. Every worry, every fear, every anxiety can be a catalyst to prayer. Don't know what to pray about? What are worrying about? Pray about it. What concerns you? Pray about it. What causes fear or anxiety? Pray about it. Have a conversation with God until His peace fills your heart and mind.

Isn't this what friends do? When I'm bothered, I talk with a friend. God wants to be that friend. God wants a conversational relationship with you.

#5—I hate to pray because...

5. What's the point?

"Nothing is going to change. When I pray, it seems like nothing happens. Besides, God does what He wants, doesn't He. So it really doesn't matter if I pray. What's the point?" Anybody identify with this? If you think prayer is pointless, you'll probably hate to pray!

How many of you have prayed for something, and it didn't happen? You've asked God for something, and didn't get it? If your hand is not up, you haven't prayed! If you pray, you've been disappointed. We don't get everything we want or ask for. Why is that? Sometimes we ask for the wrong thing.

My three year old asked to play with my razor—I shave with a blade; I'm a man! I told him no. Is it because I don't love him? No, it's because I do love him and don't want him to slice his face to ribbons!

Sometimes we ask for the wrong thing, and God lovingly says no. And, sometimes we ask for what seems like the right thing, and it still doesn't happen—and I don't know why. There is some mystery here, and I have to trust God when I don't understand. But there is another issue at stake. Is prayer primarily a means to get what I want from God, or is prayer a conversation between two persons who love each other?

We say, "What's the point? Nothing is going to change." But maybe what's changing is... me. Maybe the point of prayer is not getting something from God, but simply getting with God, knowing God, loving God. Maybe what changes most when you pray is you! When my life becomes a prayer, when I'm in all day conversation with God, His

concerns become mine. We don't just talk about what I'm concerned about. We talk about His concerns too. I begin changing, and what I care about begins to change. His heart becomes mine. Jesus makes this clear.

Jesus taught us to pray in Matthew 6:9-13 (p. 831). This, then, is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, 10 your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. 11 Give us today our daily bread. 12 And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. 13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

Before we ask for our concerns—our daily bread, forgiveness for our sins, leading and deliverance for our lives—what do we ask for first? Your name be hallowed, your kingdom come, your will be done. In other words, God's concerns first. "What do you want to talk about today, Lord?"

"What's the point? Nothing is going to change?" Oh yes it is! You are going to change. When you have an ongoing conversation with God, you will change!

"But," you say, "that's my point. I pray and I don't change. Prayer doesn't do anything for me. I don't feel closer to God. I don't connect with God. It feels like a pointless exercise." May I ask, "Are you have an honest conversation with God, or just saying prayers? Are you listening or just making speeches?" The point of prayer is connecting with God, and if you're not connecting, I'm guessing that you're not praying—you're not having a conversation between two persons who love each other. God wants a conversational relationship with you.

#6—I hate to pray because...

6. I'm not good enough.

I don't think God really wants to hear from me. I'm not worthy. I'm not good enough.

Ok, news flash: you're right! You're not worthy. You're not good enough. And neither am I. None of us are. This is why Jesus came. He came to bring us back to God. I am not good enough, but Jesus is. This is why we pray in Jesus' name. What does that mean?

To do something in someone's name, means we do it as their representative, with their authority. The US ambassador to England doesn't approach their prime minister in his own name, but in the name of our President, in the name of our country. He doesn't have any authority on his own—in his name—but he's there in the name of the US.

All of you parents have seen this. One of your kids is misbehaving and their brother or sister says, "Stop it." And the kid replies, "You're not the boss of me. You can't tell me what to do." But when the brother or sister runs off and comes back and says, "Mom says, Dad says to stop it," that's different. Now they are speaking in the name of Mom, in the name of Dad.

When we pray in the name of Jesus, it doesn't mean that we just slap that phrase on the end of our prayer, like a magic abracadabra. No. It means that we acknowledge that we are not coming to God in our own name, in our own authority, in our own goodness. We know that we are coming because of Jesus.

I never pray, "Lord, I stand before you in the name of Joe." I come in the name of Jesus. I know that I'm not worthy, but He is. I know that I'm not good enough, but He is.

Jesus came to bring you back to God. God wants a conversational relationship with you. Jesus makes that possible.

Conclusion:

For many of you, this is a radically different idea of prayer. My encouragement: Try it—you'll get better with practice. Don't get discouraged if it seems uncomfortable, if you don't seem to hear from God. Just keep listening—you'll get better with practice. God wants a conversational relationship with you. He'll help you—because He wants the relationship even more than you do! Have a conversation with God. Say yes.

[1] Rosalind Rinker, *Prayer: Conversing with God*, Zondervan, 1959. P. 23

Why We Hate to Pray

#2—Together

Introduction:

Last weekend I talked about why we hate to pray personally—but that's nothing compared to how much we hate to pray out loud with others! How many of you don't like to pray out loud with other people? This is almost universal! In a recent Barna survey, 94% said they had prayed at least once in the last 3 months. Of those 94%, only 2% most often pray with others. Prayer tends to be almost entirely a solo activity. Most people do not like to pray with others! If you doubt this, just call a prayer meeting and see who shows up! Prayer meetings are consistently the least attended of all church meetings—almost everywhere! Why is this? Praying together (the way it's usually done) is awkward and uncomfortable, dare I say boring, not to mention terribly inefficient—so people stay away from prayer meetings in droves!

And yet Jesus taught us not only to pray alone, but to pray together, and even said it was especially powerful. Why is it so hard for us? What if I could show you a way to pray together that is natural and even fun? It's very different from what you're used to, but once you get the hang of it, you're going to love it! It's revolutionary!

Last week we said, “Prayer is a conversation between two persons who love each other.” Building on that model, when we pray *together*, it’s a conversation with God and each other. Rather than taking turns making speeches to God, we’re having a conversation with God together. Our text is:

Matthew 18:19-20 (p. 844)

“Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.”

There are two verbs I want you to think about: agree and gather.

The verb “agree” in v. 19 is the Greek word, *Sumphoneo*: literally, it means “to sound together.” (*sum* = with or together + *phoneo* = to sound.) It was originally a musical word, and we get the English word, “symphony” from it. It also came to mean “to be of one mind, to agree, to be in harmony.”

Jesus said that if two of us agree about anything we ask God for, He will do it. It’s an extravagant promise: if two of you agree in prayer, God will do what you ask! Evidently, there is great power in praying together in agreement, in harmony—symphonizing in prayer! Let that sink in. Jesus teaches us to pray together and tells us it’s powerful and effective.

Jesus expects us to pray together and there is great power in praying together. So why don’t we do it more?

The second verb is “gather” in v. 20. It is the Greek word *Sunago*, which combines *sun* = with or together + *ago* = to bring. To bring together, to gather. We get the English word “synagogue” from it; a synagogue was a gathering place.

There is another amazing promise associated with this verb. Agree—God will do it. Gather—Jesus is there. When 2 or 3 (or more) of us gather in Jesus’ name (because of Him), “there I am with them,” or “there I am in the middle of you.” When two of you get together for a cup of coffee and conversation because of Jesus—He is there. When your Rooted group or mission group gathers, Jesus is there—He is in the midst of you, literally, in the middle of your gathering. It doesn’t matter if it’s 2 or 2,000, Jesus is there. It doesn’t matter if it’s at church or school or work or home or the coffee shop or the gym—Jesus is there. Any time we gather because of Jesus, He is there, in our midst. Because of the context (v. 19) this is especially true when we gather to pray. When 2 or more gather to pray, Jesus is there.

Would you say, “Jesus is here.” Tell your neighbor, “Jesus is here.” That changes everything. We’re going to apply these ideas to praying together. Here’s:

The Big Idea: When we pray together, we’re not taking turns making speeches to God; we’re having a conversation together, with God.

A tale of two prayer meetings.

I want to start with a story about two prayer meetings.

Prayer Meeting #1: When I was in high school, my youth group had a prayer meeting every Wednesday. We’d sit in a circle—there would usually be about 15-20 of us. We’d start by giving prayer requests. We’d go around the circle and each person had a chance to mention someone or something they wanted prayer for. Sometimes people had “unspoken requests,” meaning they didn’t want to name it out loud. “Pray for me, but I won’t say what.” Very curious! Sometimes, the prayer requests took up almost the entire time, so at the end we had no time to pray and had to appoint someone and they’d pray, “Lord, we lift up all these requests to you.” It was more of a talking meeting with a short generic prayer at the end.

But if we did finish prayer requests in time, then we’d pray. Someone was asked to go first, and then we went around the circle. We held hands and if you didn’t want to pray when it was your turn, you squeezed the hand of the next person. It was like the game “Electricity” and God was it! Each person who prayed made a little speech to God. And they were all pretty much the same speech. “Dear God, we thank you for this day. We ask you to bless us. We pray for so and so’s request, and so and so’s request. We pray for the boys in the Viet Nam. In Jesus’ name, Amen.” It was so repetitive—the same speech over and over. I wished one person would pray it and everyone else would just say, “Ditto.” I remember thinking that I was bored, and wondered what it was like for God! Can you imagine? Of course, when everyone else was making their speech to God, what was I doing? Was I listening? No, I was preparing my speech! I kept thinking, “There must be a better way.”

Prayer Meeting #2: My sophomore year in college, I was asked to become the youth pastor at a church in Eugene. The high school students met on Thursday night—it was called “The Hour of Power” but it was really just a bunch of stupid games and I was a

glorified babysitter. After three weeks of this, I sat the students down—about 25 of them—and said, “Next week, I’m going to teach you how to pray. If you want to learn how to pray and follow Jesus, come back. If you just want to fart around, stay home.” One of the adult advisers rushed up alarmed. “You just killed our youth group.” But the next week, there weren’t 25 students, there were 40. They were just waiting for someone to challenge them and they rose to the challenge. And six weeks later, there were 100 students. What did we do in that six weeks? We had prayer meetings! But these were unlike any prayer meetings you’ve ever been to. Students—both Christians and their pre-Christian friends—were laughing, crying, hugging, loving each other, pouring out their hearts, listening and talking to God like He was their friend and Father. They’d pray for an hour and could hardly wait to come back next week and bring a friend.

What was the difference? What did I teach them? I taught them that praying together is simply having a conversation with God and each other. Prayer is a conversation between two persons who love each other. And when we pray *together*, all that changes is the number: 2-3-4-...

Here are four simple things I taught them that revolutionized praying together.

1. Conversation: one subject at a time.

In typical prayer meetings, we take turns making speeches to God. But prayer is a conversation, a dialogue, not a monologue. It is not a speech to God, it is a conversation with God. This is true when you pray alone, or with someone. So first, toss out the old idea that we take turns making speeches to God. Toss it out!

So we’re going to have a conversation. How do conversations work?

First, we talk about one subject at a time. Someone brings up a subject, and whoever wants contributes something on that subject. And when we’re done, we naturally move on to a new subject. But we don’t bounce all over.

“Lord, I pray for my dad. Please help him find Christ.”

“God, I’ve been depressed lately. Pick me up.”

“Lord, you told us to pray for our government officials, so we are.”

“Father, help the Rams win today.”

That’s not a conversation—that’s just talking chaos. No one is listening or responding to what anyone else is saying—but that’s how we often pray. Toss it out!

Good conversations are one subject at a time.

“Lord, I pray for my dad. Please help him find Christ.”

“Yes, Lord, send people to Joe’s dad who will love Him and share Jesus with him.”

“Agreed. And soften his heart so he’s willing to listen.”

“And, Lord, give Joe wisdom and words to share with his dad.”

“Father, help the Rams win today.”

Ok, the last guy botched it—but you get the idea. We are having a conversation with each other and God—and it goes one subject at a time. How do you know when it’s time to change subjects? How does that work in a conversation? There’s a pause, a sense that we’ve covered the subject and it’s time to move on.

First, we talk about one subject at a time. Second, everyone gets to contribute. If you have something to add on this subject, you chime in. You don’t need to make a speech, just add your thoughts to the conversation. Short and simple. If you don’t have something to add, that’s ok.

So the first principle is conversation. We are having a conversation with God and with each other. Usually, when we pray we close our eyes to avoid distraction and focus on God. Nothing wrong with that. But it’s also not required. When Laina and I pray together in the car, I keep my eyes open. She’s happy about that. When I pray with others, I often have my eyes open, because we’re having a conversation together with God. Remember, where two or more gather, Jesus is in the midst. Jesus is here—we’re talking with Him...together.

Sometimes in our group conversation, I'm addressing God; sometimes I'm addressing someone in the group. Which leads to the second principle:

2.Honesty: be genuine.

Prayer is a conversation, not a monologue, and honesty is the basis of any good conversation. If you're not honest, no genuine communication happens. So let's get real! Here's some examples.

First, address the person to whom you're speaking. Usually when I'm praying in a group I'm speaking to God, but sometimes, it's you I want to speak to. Have you heard this: someone wants to pray for something and realizes that no one else in the group knows the background. "Lord, I'm praying for Bob. You know that Bob is married with three small kids, ages 8, 6, and 4; and you know that Bob has a healthy mortgage. You know that Bob just lost his job. So I'm asking you to provide a new job for Bob." Question: did God already know who Bob was and that he'd lost his job? Of course. So who was all that information for? The rest of the group. So why not just address the group. "Hey gang, my friend Bob is married with three kids and just lost his job." Then, "So Lord, provide a new job for Bob." Say what you want to the group—and say what you want to God. It's ok to go back and forth—we're having a conversation.

Second, be yourself. Be genuine. You don't have to use King James English. You don't have to sound holy or spiritual. You don't have to use a prayer voice.

I remember once I was praying and tried to sound spiritual, and I felt like God interrupted by laughing at me. Not a derisive laugh or a scornful laugh—just an amused laugh. He said, "Who are you trying to impress? I know who you really are—and I like you. Just be yourself."

Third, say I when you mean I. Often, we cloak our struggles by using the "royal we." "Lord, you know that we all struggle with unforgiveness. Forgive us our anger and bitterness." Really, what I mean is, "Lord, you know that I'm struggling with unforgiveness. I'm really torqued; help me to let go of my anger and bitterness." That's honest. What might be a good response from the group? "Tell us what's going on." Then pray.

Good conversations require honesty. Let's get real. Let's be honest and genuine.

Third principle of conversational prayer:

3. Listening: to God and people.

In typical prayer groups, what happens? While someone is making their speech, rather than listening, I'm busy composing my speech. Or I'm daydreaming. But we're not making speeches—we've tossed that idea. We're having a conversation with God together. And good conversations require active listening. And since we're praying in a group, it means that I listen to you when you pray, and I listen to God.

First, listen to the person who is talking. I'm not daydreaming, I'm not composing my speech, I'm listening to you. This is a powerful act of love. When you listen attentively, actively, you are expressing interest, concern and love for the person who is talking. If you don't listen, you express the opposite—I don't really care about you or what you're saying. This is part of what made that second prayer meeting so powerful. Students were pouring out their hearts, and others were listening and loving them. Listen!

If we are having a conversation, then when you are talking, I'm listening so that I can respond. In a moment I'll show you how to let others know that you're listening. First, listen to the person who is talking—it's active love.

Second, listen to God. Jesus is here—He is in our midst, in the middle of our circle. And He has things to say too. So listen to Him.

This means that we don't have to be afraid or uncomfortable with silence. If we finish a subject and everyone is quiet, it's a good time to listen to God, to see if He has anything to say on the subject.

And if He does, if you hear something from God, and you think it's for the group, don't be afraid to say it. Again, be yourself. You don't need to thunder, "Thus saith the Lord." You don't need a holy voice or King James English. You can just say, "Here is what I'm hearing..." or "I think the Lord might be saying..." These are powerful moments! I've seen people overcome by God's word to them.

Listen. Listen to the person who is speaking. Listen to God—He's part of the conversation too!

The fourth principle of conversational prayer:

4. Agreeing: everyone prays all the time.

Jesus said, “If two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.” There is great power in agreeing. How does this happen in a conversation? How do we communicate our agreement? By looking the other person in the eye and smiling, nodding, affirming by voice—a sound, a word—and even by saying, “Yes, I agree with that.”

In a typical prayer group, one person makes a speech while everyone else is silent. One person prays, while the others don't. But in a good conversation, everyone participates all the time. Everyone contributes and everyone listens and responds, usually with agreement.

The word “agree” is the Greek word, *sumphoneo*. We get the English word, “symphony” from it. How does a symphony work? One instrument, maybe the first violins, take the melody for a stretch, and everyone else harmonizes. Then the melody moves to the cellos, then the bassoon, then the flutes, then the kettle drums. And as the different instruments take turns carrying the melody, everyone else is harmonizing.

That's how conversational prayer works. When you speak, you are the melody and the rest of us are harmonizing, agreeing, symphonizing with you. Then it's my turn to carry the melody and you symphonize.

But you never go to a symphony and just hear the first violins playing all by themselves while everyone else sits in silence all night. “The violins have a speech to give.” You'd want your money back!

Express your agreement—symphonize! In a good conversation, everyone is participating all the time: sometimes talking, sometimes listening, sometimes agreeing. Do the same when you pray together.

The problem is that we're used to praying with our eyes closed, and making speeches. Let's toss that out! Let's have a conversation. When you speak, I'll listen and harmonize. Just like in any conversation, if I agree with you, I'll express it—with a nod, a smile, a "yes" or "amen." This will be hard for some of you who have been taught that when someone else prays, you're silent. Nope—we're all part of the conversation all the time. You can agree out loud.

To help the students get over their fear of agreeing out loud in prayer, I had them do an exercise. We stood in a circle and held hands with our eyes open. Then I asked people to tell God in a sentence something they were thankful for. Then we'd all throw up our hands and shout, "Yes Lord, I agree with that!" It was crazy, but it worked. When we broke up in groups, the ice was broken. It was ok to agree out loud.

Let's try it. Everyone stand and take hands. I'll say a few one line prayers, and after each one, raise your hands and shout, "Yes Lord, I agree with that!"

- Thank you Lord for loving us!
- Thank you for all the food we'll eat today!
- Please keep all the calories off my waist!
- Thank you for inviting us into a conversation!
- Thank you for teaching us to pray!
- Thank you for joy!
- Thank you for life to the full!
- Please help the Rams win today!

You don't all agree with that! And that will happen sometimes when we pray—and that's good. If I pray something and no one agrees with me, I'll ask, "What's up?" We'll talk about it and come to something we can agree on—because if two people on earth agree about anything they ask for, our Father will do it! We're having an honest conversation—and getting to agreement—to a symphony of prayer.

Here's how we'll finish. We're going to give you 10 minutes to get in groups of 3 or 4 or 5—and let's have a conversation together with each other and with God. You've got the four principles on your handout—you can refer to those to keep you on track. If you're wondering what to pray about, here are a few ideas.

- Jesus is here. Welcome Lord!
- Thank you for...
- Help me...
- Help my brother/sister...

Let's not make speeches. Let's have a conversation! Have fun!