



COMMUNICATOR GUIDE

Thoughts and Prayers / Week 1

PRELUDE

SOCIAL

WORSHIP

STORY

GROUPS

HOME

SERIES BOTTOM LINE

What would you say if you knew Jesus was actually listening?

GOAL OF SMALL GROUP

To give students the freedom and encouragement to start praying real, honest prayers.

WEEK 1 BOTTOM LINE

**Honest prayer > fancy prayer.
Honest prayer is greater than fancy prayer.**

SCRIPTURE

- James 4:8a NIV
- Psalm 145:18 NIV

TEACHING SLIDES

All scripture, bottom lines, and teaching points that are bolded in this script are also provided as slides in your weekly "Teaching" folder.

OPTIONAL VIDEOS

*OPTIONAL MEDIA for this week available for purchase through the XP3 HS Media Package:

- Thoughts and Prayers – Week 1 Countdown (10 minutes)
- Vending Machine Video (for the interactive)
- Thoughts and Prayers – Week 1 Teaching Video

TEACHING OUTLINE

INTRODUCTION

- Have you ever heard the phrase “thoughts and prayers?”
- We use this phrase to basically say: “Wow, that’s tough. I can’t fix it, make it better, or make it go away, but I’ll pray for you. Or I’m thinking about you.”
- And, most of us, mean it. We mean “at some point in my day, even right now as I type this, I’m going to pray for you,” but—you know this already—oftentimes, typing “thoughts and prayers” is a lot easier than *actually* praying for someone.
- **[INTERACTIVE]:** See Communicator Guide for detailed instructions.

TENSION

- Sometimes I think prayer feels that way—like there’s a right combination of words you have to say.
- Maybe like me, you’ve tried to pray and felt like you had to use. . .
 - **Fancy words.**
 - **Formal words.**
 - **Fake words.**
- The point is, it can feel like when we pray, we have to use the right combination of “two formal words, a fancy closer, and a little fake happy” to make things work.
- Why do we feel that way?
- I think for a lot of us, it’s that deep down, we believe this: **“If I pray the right way, God will give me what I want.”**
- **Have you ever prayed and gotten nothing?**
- Maybe, like me, you’ve wondered, “what happened?!” “Am I doing it wrong?” or “what’s the point of all this?”
- Or, maybe, here’s a better question: **If there’s a God and if God loves you, why make prayer so difficult?**

TRUTH

- We are going to look at two passages from the Bible today, written hundreds of years apart from each other, but both are helpful in getting us to see prayer in a better way.
- James writes this:
 - *“Come near to God and he will come near to you” (James 4:8a NIV).*
- James is not saying:
 - Come near to God, and you will get exactly what you pray for.
 - Pray using the right combination of words, and God will come near to you.
 - Get your act together first, and God will listen to your prayers.
- In other words, prayer isn’t about the words, or the results or a formula. It’s about being *near*. The point is becoming close to God. It’s about having a relationship.
- In a part of the Hebrew Scriptures called Psalms, a guy named David, 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 emphasis added).*
- David, just like James, seemed to think that prayer was a little more than just using the right combination of fancy words to talk to God.
- **It was about confidence in God being close to us and connecting with us when we pray.**
- In other words, if there is any formula for prayer, it isn’t formal + fancy + fake. No, it’s this:
 - **[BOTTOM LINE]: Honest prayer > Fancy prayer**
- If you had a great, deep connection with a friend, it’s because someone started being real. And oftentimes, the same is true with God.

APPLICATION

- For those of you who have stopped praying, I want to ask you to **give it another shot.**
- For others of you who have been praying for a while, I want you to **add *listening* to part of your habit of prayer.**
- There's one way in particular that can be helpful. I call it a "prayer pattern."
 - **Write your honest prayers and then read them out loud to God.**
 - **Be intentional about taking a literal break from talking.**
- No matter what you decide to do to begin to develop your prayer pattern, there is one important thing to remember:
 - *Listen.*
- **God can speak to you in a bunch of different ways.**

LANDING

- As you head out today, I want you to know God loves you and wants nothing more than to be close to you and connect with you.



TEACHING SCRIPT

Thoughts and Prayers / Week 1

PRELUDE SOCIAL WORSHIP STORY GROUPS HOME

WEEK 1 BOTTOM LINE

**Honest prayer > fancy prayer.
Honest prayer is greater than fancy prayer.**

INTRODUCTION

3 - 4 MINUTES

Have you ever heard the phrase “thoughts and prayers?” It’s the kind of thing people will say if they hear that someone is going through something really difficult or maybe it’s said kind of like a joke, like: “You have to spend all weekend in SAT prep class? Thoughts and prayers for you.”

We use this phrase to basically say: “Wow, that’s tough. I can’t fix it, make it better or make it go away, but I’ll pray for you. Or I’m thinking about you.” It’s sort of the long way of saying this: (Communicator note: Show a picture of the praying hands emoji.)

We’ve all seen this, right? Somebody in your group text at school says, “Pray for me guys. I’m going through _____,” and people respond with prayer emoji or “thoughts and prayers” or “prayers up” or some other phrase that means the same thing. And, most of us, mean it. We mean “at some point in my day, even right now as I type this, I’m going to pray for you,” but—you know this already—oftentimes, typing “thoughts and prayers” is a lot easier than *actually* praying for someone. In fact, typing the prayer hands emoji is easier than even praying for myself.

Even though I think prayer is a good idea, even though I say I’m going to do it, the whole thing just kinda feels, well, complicated. Maybe like this:



INTERACTIVE

OPTIONAL MEDIA available for purchase through the XP3HS Media Package:
Thoughts and Prayers Week 1 – “Vending Machine Video”

Communicator note: Use a prop on stage to enhance this interactive. This interactive script is written using a vending machine as the example; however, several other visual metaphors can work here. Any prop that works by putting something in with the expectation of getting something out will work. (For instance, we used a candy dispenser like a gumball machine in the interactive video provided in your media package.) A locker with a combination lock would also work.

Think of your favorite vending machine snack. When I was a kid, my answer was M&Ms. 100%, without question the best vending machine snack. If I went to a vending machine, I was definitely getting M&Ms. There was no competition. I didn't even have to think about my decision. In fact, I even memorized the exact right combination of buttons I had to press (it was C6, by the way) to get the M&Ms.

But have you ever accidentally pressed the wrong combination of buttons? Like you meant to hit C6 but you pressed the wrong key and now instead of M&Ms, you got some gross wheat chips? Or maybe you hit the wrong combination of buttons and the whole thing just jammed up? There is *nothing* more frustrating.

TENSION

3 MINUTES

I bring it up because sometimes I think prayer feels that way—like there's a right combination of words you have to say.

Maybe like me, you've tried to pray and felt like you had to use. . .

- **Fancy words.** We do the whole bow-our-heads and close-our-eyes thing, and suddenly we are back in colonial times using strange words: *"Dearest Lord God, Creator of heaven and earth, thanketh Thee for this blessed morning." Or...*
- **Formal words.** Somehow people just know this special combination of words to start or end a prayer and it sounds so formal, perfect, and serious. *"Lord, we pray in the name of Jesus Christ whose blood has cleansed us from sin and redeemed our souls and purified our spirits."*
- **Fake words.** Maybe you've noticed when praying it feels like you have to be overly positive and holy, even if you don't feel that way. Maybe you try to make things sound okay when they're really not *"Oh Lord. Thank you that we got a win last night. I know I played the worst game of my entire life, but I'm so glad my teammates had the best game of theirs. Thank you for always helping me care WAY more about the overall team performance than my own personal performance."*

The point is, it can feel like when we pray, we have to use the right combination of "two formal words, a fancy closer, and a little fake happy" to make things work. Why do we feel that way? What is it that convinces us we have to be fancy or fake or super formal when we pray? Where did we get that idea?

I think for a lot of us, it's that deep down, we believe this:

"If I pray the right way, God will give me what I want."

We think, (*Pretend to press the buttons on a vending machine*). "If I just hit the right combination of fancy words, thee's and thou's, a good attitude, and throw in a 'in-your-name-we-pray,' then BAM! I should get what I want!

Of course, it doesn't always work that way, right?

Have you ever prayed and gotten nothing? Sometimes our prayers feel more like M&Ms stuck in the vending machine than like getting what we want.

Whether it was something that doesn't seem like a big deal—we've all prayed that we would find a phone charger—or something really huge, like healing for our sick relative. These are real requests

that are a big deal to us. So, when you put yourself out there and pray about them, but the prayer seems to go unanswered, it leaves you with a question that we've probably all asked:

Does prayer even work?

Maybe, like me, you've wondered, "what happened?!" "Am I doing it wrong?" or "what's the point of all this?"

Or, maybe, here's a better question: **If there's a God and if God loves you, why make prayer so difficult?** I mean, is God intentionally being difficult about this whole prayer thing? Or, is it possible, that this awkward, confusing, perfect combination of fancy-formal-and-fake kind of prayer was never what God intended in the first place?

TRUTH

4 MINUTES

We are going to look at two passages from the Bible today, written hundreds of years apart from each other, but both are helpful in getting us to see prayer in a better way. The first passage was written by a guy named James, who wasn't just a random Jesus-follower. James was the brother of Jesus, and while Jesus was alive, James wasn't exactly Jesus' biggest fan. He didn't think Jesus was the Son of God...until Jesus was crucified, or killed, and then came back to life. That was enough to change James' mind. So, in this letter, after having faith in who Jesus is and what Jesus did, James writes this:

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

Maybe that doesn't sound like much, but what James is NOT saying in this verse is just as important as what he is saying. James is not saying:

- Come near to God, and you will get exactly what you pray for.
- Pray using the right combination of words, and God will come near to you.
- Get your act together first, and God will listen to your prayers.

In fact, James doesn't seem to be saying you have to do much of anything except, show up. In other words, prayer isn't about the words, or the results or a formula. It's about being *near*. The point is becoming close to God. It's about having a relationship.

In some ways, it's almost like we've missed the whole point of prayer. Does God want to hear about our wants and needs? Absolutely! But more than that, God wants to be close to us, to be a Friend to us, to be near.

James isn't the only person to talk about prayer in a surprising way. In fact, James grew up learning the Hebrew Scriptures, written long before he was born. In a part of the Hebrew Scriptures called Psalms, a guy named David, 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 emphasis added).*

David, just like James, seemed to think that prayer was a little more than just using the right combination of fancy words to talk to God. For both of them, the point wasn't just about communicating our requests and waiting to get what want. **It was about confidence in God being close to us and connecting with us when we pray.** And, at the same time, David points out something important—truth. Think about it, to be connected to somebody, you have to be real with

them. You can't be totally fake and have a great relationship with anyone. So, as much as we don't have to be fancy or formal to connect with God, we really shouldn't be fake, either.

What David knew, what James knew, what I have discovered and what so many of the leaders in this room have discovered is that there is a real God who wants a real relationship with you. And, like any other relationship you have, there has to be some real, honest conversation. In other words, if there is any formula for prayer, it isn't formal + fancy + fake. No, it's this:

Honest prayers > Fancy prayer

One of the best ways to connect with *anyone* is being honest with them. You know this already. Think about some of the best, the deepest, conversations you've ever had with a friend. Maybe it was on the band bus headed home after a late game. Maybe it was on Discord after a good game. Maybe it was around a campfire. Maybe it was taking a break at the skatepark or even a late-night text thread. No matter where you hung out, there's a good chance that the conversation got good when somebody got honest. It wasn't because one person used the right combination of words to get what they wanted (that's called manipulation, by the way). If you had a great, deep connection with a friend, it's because someone started being real. And oftentimes, the same is true with God.

APPLICATION

3 MINUTES

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 God. Simply begin to talk to God again.

For others of you who have been praying for a while, I want you to add *listening* to part of your habit of prayer. Maybe you've been treating prayer like a vending machine for years and it feels like it's stuck. It's not working. Instead, think of prayer like a conversation with a friend—the point is connection. Should you do some talking? Sure. But also, try listening.

God most likely won't talk back to you in an audible voice, but Jesus told us He would leave His Spirit here with us, the Holy Spirit, and when we take time to be quiet in prayer, we can be confident that God's Spirit is working in our lives, and we can pay attention and listen for it. And there are other ways we "listen" for God.

There's one way in particular that can be helpful. I call it a "prayer pattern."

Here's a way to start.

- **Write your honest 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. Keep in mind, as you write your prayers out or type them in a notes app, that **honest prayer is better than fancy prayer** because the point isn't to impress anyone, but to connect with God. And remember as you write that the point is less about informing God about what is going on in your life, and more about being honest because the honesty is what builds connection.

Then, by writing down or typing your honest prayer, you can look back at your prayer weeks or months later 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 how God has been working in your life. Then, pray more and look back more and pray more creating a pattern.

- **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.** God 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 God speaks to you, you will still get the message and you'll grow closer in the process.

LANDING

1 MINUTE

As you head out today, I want you to know God loves you and wants nothing more than to be close 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. God wants to connect with you honestly and in a real way—and that's bigger than just saying "thoughts and prayers."

This week as you talk with your small group, think about this question:

What do you need to do to begin treating prayer more like a friendship instead of a vending machine?



TRANSITION INTO SMALL GROUPS
