We get to know a friend better by talking and listening to each other; building the relationship. Usually when that’s done on a regular basis the relationship grows stronger and deeper; we create a history together and a bond forms with shared understanding. We might call this time together all kinds of things when it comes to our friends, but with God, we call it prayer time. And, prayer time can be a variety of things we do to build a relationship.

In close relationships, we listen with our hearts to what the other is saying with their eyes and voice and actions – and create a two-way street of mutual respect, love and appreciation. The ‘goal’ of prayer time then, so to speak, is to build up this same good relationship with God –and grow into understanding something of how each other thinks and feels.

What are we looking for when we share a part of yourself with someone else? Genuine interest? Someone who sincerely cares about your opinions and thoughts? Someone who really listens when you speak? Someone who understands you? Relationships where we feel that kind of connection are the ones we value most.

Nearly everyone is looking for the same thing – a relationship that means something. God is, too. So, though it might take some disciplined effort, talking to God – letting God know how we are right now and why we’re feeling sad, happy, angry, whatever at the moment - is pretty direct and not usually too difficult. Whether you talk to God out loud or in your mind isn’t an issue. Whether it’s a set time of day or spontaneously throughout the day doesn’t really matter. What matters is that we intentionally, consciously talk, touch base on a regular basis.

Now we’re talking to God, sharing how we feel, and that’s a good thing. But, we also have to keep in mind prayer time is part of the two-way relationship. If prayer is to be more meaningful than a check-in and request sent up via space how does it help you grow into an understanding of the mind of God? Again, just as in any valuable relationship, we need to listen as well as speak. If someone does all the talking and never listens, it’s a one-way street.

There’s the challenge – how do we listen to God? If we limit listening to what actually comes through our ears that might be difficult. There are those who hear God speak to them this way, but it’s definitely not common. What seems to be much more in keeping with mankind in general is a process of focusing, paying attention, reflection, and observation; concentrating, keeping our mind on God – tuning our inward radar to God.

For instance, when we read, mark, learn and inwardly digest God’s word (Scripture) we do so with the hopes to grow and understand God’s meaning. God speaks to us in countless ways - through friends, family, books, music, movies, etc. We experience God’s communicative self through Word (Scripture) and Sacraments (Holy Communion, etc) and experience (mysticism, “still small voice”, etc).

God is always talking to us, though we may not be listening. Just as we do with a good friend or parent, we have to be intentional in our actions in order to build the relationship – learn more about each other – and let it the relationship be a two-way street.

When we love someone, we begin to understand the same language, thoughts and see the world through their eyes....
We would do well to remember in our prayers that God is not Santa Claus.

God hears and responds to our needs – whether we intentionally express them during prayer time or not. However, to rationalize that just because you didn’t get want you wanted and “prayed for” means that God either didn’t hear your request or doesn’t care or doesn’t exist doesn’t fit in with the Christian belief in a loving, involved God who is near.

Think about if you asked your friend to do something for you that was not in your best interest (say, do your homework) and they refused to do it – you might be angry. Surely, you’ve helped them out and expect them to return the favor. But, if your friend had your best interest at heart – knew that you really needed to do the homework so that you would pass the test the next week – then what they did was the best thing for you. Even if that puts you in a bad place right now.

C.S. Lewis also put it well in this example. Every parent is so proud and happy to see their baby take its first unsteady steps – but if that same child were still stumbling around as an 18 year old – the parent would not be so pleased; the child wasn’t using it’s natural ability to the fullest and would insist they make some changes.

Not getting what we want doesn’t mean a friend doesn’t love us – or that a parent doesn’t love their child. In fact, isn’t it more likely the friend and parent loved their child so much that they were willing to let them be unhappy to achieve, with them, a greater good or purpose?

Consider whether God might be responding to what we ask for with what we need. If we believe God wants us to be the best human being we can be - using every reason, talent, skills we were given - then if makes sense we don’t always get what we want because it’s easy for us to keep stumbling around and refuse to grow! If becoming the best you are is important to you it makes more sense that we would seek God’s help in finding out how to use that reason, talent and skill to the best of our ability; asking God to keep us on track by pointing us in the right direction.