



Lesson One: When you meet with God...keep it real.

Teaching

Luke 11:1 – 2a *“One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him ‘Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.’ He said to them, ‘When you pray, say:”*

Matthew 6: 5 *“But when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.”*

We were created for relationship...

When babies are born into the world, they come with all the physical equipment – eyes, mouth and ears – that gives them the potential for communicating with others. They were created by God to have relationships with other human beings, and whilst their ability to communicate needs to be developed as they grow up, they should have all that they require to do this. But God did not intend to limit us to communicating with only our fellow human beings. It was always his intention that we should also communicate with him. In the end, the most important relationship we have been created for is our friendship with God. So, just as we are born with all this potential for communicating with other human beings, so God created us with the potential for communicating with him.

However, there is one major problem when it comes to communicating with God. The problem is not our ability to speak to him, since he is able to hear everything we say or think. The problem lies in our ability to hear when God is speaking to us. There is a line in the Paul Simon song *Slip Slid’n Away* which goes, *“God only knows. God makes his plans. The information is unavailable to the mortal man.”* For so many people this is exactly their experience of God. They might believe that he exists, but they often see him as a mystery; as one whom they have no possibility of knowing, let alone communicating with as we would with our fellow humans.

Have you ever seen one of those trick pictures which, at first glance, appears to be a jumble of shapes and patterns until someone points out to you that amidst the patterns there is a hidden picture - perhaps of a human face? The Holy Spirit is the one who shows us that in the jumble of this world there is a hidden face of God. How clearly we see that face will tell us something of where we are on our own spiritual journey. When Simon-Peter identified Jesus as being the Son of God, Jesus said, *“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven”* (Matthew 16: 17). God the Father had revealed something

about God the Son, through God the Holy Spirit. Then in John 15: 26 Jesus says, *“When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me.”* Then later in John 16: 13 Jesus says, *“But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth.”* The Holy Spirit reveals the truth to us about God, not in one blinding flash, but gradually throughout our life time. The Holy Spirit knows the mind of the Father, so when we seek the will of God in some issue or other it is the Holy Spirit who reveals his thoughts to us. This means that there can be a two-way communication going on between us and God. If we humbly seek God, and try to avoid things that will grieve the Holy Spirit who lives in us, we will grow in godly wisdom and in our ability to discern the voice of God. So this course is built on the premise that we do have the capacity to communicate with God, in both directions, and that this capacity can be developed. We can learn to pray!

Prayer reflects our relationship with God...

Both before and after Jesus walked on the earth in New Testament times, it was common for particular Rabbis within the Jewish world to have a group of disciples, and one of the things those disciples would want to learn from their teacher was how to pray. From our Luke 11 passage above it is clear that John the Baptist spent time teaching his disciples how to pray, so it was not surprising that Jesus’ disciples would have asked him to teach them as well. Of course, the disciples, as devout Jews, would have been praying all their lives, but they had just been watching Jesus pray, and something about how he was praying excited their hearts. Jesus really knew how to pray, and how he prayed reflected the certainty and depth of the relationship he had with his Father.

Prayer always does reflect our relationship with God. As one author on prayer says, *“I hesitate to say that prayer is like a skill, because prayer is much more like a friendship.”*¹ When Jesus talked about prayer in Matthew 6: 5, he was making the point that those hypocrites who prayed elaborate prayers in public places did not pray out of their relationship with God, but rather to impress and improve their relationships with other human beings. Their efforts presumably paid off because Jesus said that they *“received their reward in full.”* Then we have the story of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, *“To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: ‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: “God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.” But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted”* (Luke 18: 9-14). In this story Jesus quotes the prayers of both the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, and shows by their words and body language which one has a right relationship with God. So you can imagine how Jesus’ disciples must have felt when they saw and heard Jesus talking to his Father in heaven. They must have wondered at the intimacy of his words as he poured out his thoughts and the desires of his heart to his Father, and so their request for Jesus to teach them how to pray came out of their own deep hearts desire for such a friendship with God.

¹ “Prayer and Contemplation” by Mark Gibbard. 1985, page 26.

A desire for relationship with God is essential...

This, then, is the first requirement for someone to grow in their ability to pray - their desire for a real friendship with God. If a person had no desire to deepen their relationships with other human beings they would make no effort to develop their capacity to communicate. In the same way, many people seem to have little or no interest in fostering any kind of personal friendship with God. It is because of this lack of desire that they are unable to communicate with him, and so they assume that it is not possible for anyone to communicate with God (if he exists). The desire has to come first, a desire which originates from God himself, planted in our hearts. If you are doing this course then you must have such a desire, and for that desire to become a reality you need to keep your prayer time as real as possible. There is no need for show or pretence - God knows you too well for that anyway!

One more thing...in our Luke 11 passage above Jesus says, "When you pray, say:.." To become good at communicating with God through prayer there is no other substitute for doing it. Books on prayer can teach us a lot about prayer, as well as encourage us to pray. But in the end, if we want to grow as pray-ers the only way to do so is to set aside time for prayer and just do it. The most important aspect of this prayer course are the prayer exercises. It is these that will make the difference to your prayer lives, and so I can only encourage you strongly to keep going with them. They are not complicated exercises, and if you find that you can do a particular exercise better by modifying it slightly, feel free to do so. How each of us prays will always be unique, just as the way we communicate with other people is unique, so let the Holy Spirit guide you through these exercises so that you do them in a way that works best for you. Meanwhile, I would suggest you keep some sort of written note or journal when doing the exercises so that you will be able to look back over the weeks and see what you have done, and how God has interacted with you during this time.

Here are two more practical tips when coming to pray:

- 1) Try to set aside a specific time (or even several times) to pray each day.
- 2) You may find it helpful to have a specific place to pray each day, like in a particular chair or room.

Whilst we can pray at any time and in any place, most people will find having a routine helpful.

Exercise

For the exercises in the first three lessons we are going to be focussing on Centering Prayer. We all live such busy lives and that busyness can crowd God out. The idea of Centering Prayer is that we slow down and come to a place of rest. It is, then, in stillness and quietness that we can grow in our sense of God's presence. Prayer is a dialogue between us and God, not a monologue in which we do all the talking and he does all the listening. A good conversation between two people must include both people talking well and listening well. Generally, it's the listening well that we find so difficult in our conversation with God, and it's hardly surprising since we can neither see him with our eyes nor hear him with our ears. So Centering Prayer is about developing the spiritual eyes and ears that will enable us to increase our ability to talk with God.

In this exercise we are going to focus on being physically still for ten minutes. That may sound simple but for many people being motionless for any period of time is a hard thing to do. You need

to find a place which is generally quiet and where you will be undisturbed. If you want to have some quiet worship music playing in the background that is fine, though it might be more helpful if it is only instrumental music rather than songs. Seat yourself in a chair or somewhere where you will be comfortable for ten minutes (but not so comfortable that you fall asleep). It is generally recommended that you keep both feet on the floor rather than crossing your legs, as many people find that after a while they need to adjust their position if they have legs crossed. So the point is to get into a position that won't need adjusting after a short while.

To begin the exercise, tell God that you are offering the next ten minutes as a gift of time to him. This is very important; unless we set aside time for God we will never make progress in our friendship with him. So thank him for the opportunity to spend time with him and ask him to help you grow in your sensitivity to him as you do these exercises. Then, for the next ten minutes focus your mind on the stillness of your body; starting with your toes and slowly moving up to the top of your head. As you do this, allow each part of your body to relax and be at rest. Once you have finished this process, focus on your breathing, feeling the movement of your lungs as the air goes in and out.

As I have said, the idea of this exercise is to develop stillness and awareness. This ultimately will include stilling the mind, but try not to think about how successful (or unsuccessful) you are at doing this. Just focus your mind on your body and the rest will follow in due course. At the end of the ten minutes you may find your body has reached a stillness that you do not want to break. Certainly this has been my experience! So break it with small movements, and remember to thank God for the time you have just had with him.

Exercise in brief:

- 1) Pray – give God this time you have set aside for him.
- 2) Sit still and comfortably for ten minutes.
- 3) Focus your mind on your body.
- 4) Relax.
- 5) Close the exercise with a prayer of thanks.

For more information on Centering Prayer see www.centeringprayer.com

Encouragement

Fiona writes...

I have a friend called Heather whose car was damaged in an accident. She really needed a car at that time for work. The insurance company had written her car off as not economically repairable, but it was repairable. She wanted to pay for repairs rather than have it replaced, and it was going to take time for the money to come through from the insurance. She had told friends about the accident but not that she had a large repair cost coming up.

Just at the time she was due to collect the repaired car she was sent some money which had been collected for her by her church when they had heard about the accident. They had been praying that God would help her recover, rather than for her transport situation, as she'd been quite badly hurt. But as people in her church prayed, so they felt prompted to give money towards the repairs

to her car. Loads of folk contributed a little each and it was all in coins and notes. When she came to pay for the repairs, the amount that had been given was exactly the amount on the bill, exact to the penny. The encouragement from that certainly helped her recover!

Heather writes...

When I was a fairly new Christian in my early teens I borrowed my dad's cassette tape player without asking him (because he was out) and it stopped working. I was horrified and started pressing buttons and shaking it and crying at it but nothing worked. Eventually I started praying; you know how it goes, 'Please, Lord, make this tape player work'!! Nothing happened and I put the tape player back hoping my dad would never find out. The guilt ate away at me and when my dad came home I blurted out what I had done. He was none too pleased that I took it without asking him but went to check it. I couldn't believe it, it was working perfectly. You can't fool God. He knew that if he'd mended it straight away I would not have owned up to my dad. Lesson learnt!

Sayings of the Desert Fathers/Mothers

"Abba Macarius was asked, 'How should one pray?' The old man said, 'There is no need at all to make long discourses; it is enough to stretch out one's hands and say, "Lord, as you will, and as you know, have mercy." And if the conflict grows fiercer say, "Lord, help!" He knows very well what we need and he shows us his mercy.'"