



## Lesson Ten: When you meet with God...don't be proud, you need his help.

### Reflection/Discussion

I have mentioned before the order of the different parts of the Lord's Prayer, and it is worth noticing this again. It might seem reasonable for God to expect us to repent of any sin before we approach him with our requests. But in the Lord's Prayer the repenting comes after asking! See Matthew 6: 11-12 *"Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."* We do not need to make God feel good about us before we can ask him for something - God already does feel good about us! We do not need to seek forgiveness before placing our requests before God - we are already forgiven! We were forgiven two thousand years ago when Jesus said his final words on the cross, "It is finished" and then died (John 19: 30). On that day it was as if Judgement Day was brought forward in time, except that Jesus experienced the judgement instead of us. Matthew makes this clear in his description of events when Jesus died (Matthew 27: 45, 51-53). The darkness, the earthquake, people coming out of their tombs are all vivid pictures of the final Judgement Day. So for those who put their trust in Jesus judgement has already taken place, the penalty has been paid and our sins have already been forgiven!

However, we still need to repent for God to apply the healing power of his forgiveness to us, but what we are doing when we repent is engaging in a friendship with God, not arguing our case in a court of law, nor bartering in a market for something that we want. To repent is to seek to improve the relationship we already have with God by acknowledging the truth about ourselves, and by turning to God for his help to make that truth about us even better than it was in the past.

### Teaching

Matthew 6: 13 *"And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."*

Luke 11: 4b *"And lead us not into temptation."*

### Addicted to sin...

In his book *12½ Steps to Spiritual Health*, Howard Astin takes the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and uses them to help ordinary Christians on their spiritual journey. Having worked with recovering alcoholics I have often wondered if this programme of self examination could be useful for Christians, and then I discovered Astin had had the same idea! He writes, *"We may not have a problem with drink. We may not see ourselves addicted to anything. Yet the Bible teaches us right from the start, way back in Genesis, that in fact human beings are powerless over something. That something is sin."*

I'm sure Paul would have agreed with this if his following statement is anything to go by. *"We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.*

*So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin"* (Romans 7: 14 – 25).

However much Paul tried to do what he saw as the right thing, sin, like an addiction, kept on diverting him into wrong actions, attitudes, thoughts, etc. But at least he was aware of the problem. I have known people in the early stages of an addiction say, *"I could give it up if I wanted to. I just don't want to."* They did not believe themselves to be enslaved by what they were doing, at least not at that moment in time. Later they would become more aware of just how much control their addiction had over them. Often, when the urge came on them, no amount of willpower or logical thinking made any difference in stopping them from drinking, smoking or taking drugs.

So treating sin as an addiction, Astin takes the first step of Alcoholics Anonymous and slightly modifies it to say, *"We admit we are powerless over our sin – that our lives have become unmanageable."* For many of us, that statement might seem a bit strong. Perhaps we believe that we are mostly in control over ourselves. I do not wish to argue the point, but what I would say is that whilst there are many sins and actions which are obvious to us, and to those around us, the sickness of sin can be at work in our lives in very unobvious ways! We are unlikely to know just how much we are affected by it. Like it or not, we are in great need of a God who is able to overcome the world (John 16: 33b, *"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."*), and heal us of our wounds (Isaiah 53: 5, *"But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed"*).

### Making progress...

On the subject of sin, there is a difference in emphasis between the Western church and the Eastern Orthodox church. In the Western church the emphasis has tended to be on the idea of Original Sin, or that we are born with the tendency to sin, which remains with us throughout our lives and keeps us separated from God. In the Orthodox church the emphasis is on the journey towards holiness with the ultimate possibility of 'union with God' even in this life. What is clear in both wings of the church is that we can and should be making progress, but we cannot do it without God's help. Whilst there are things that we can do (like the spiritual disciplines I mentioned in a previous lesson) we are dependent on the work of God in our lives as we battle

with spiritual forces that work against us. So this is what Jesus is addressing when he tells us to pray, *"And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."* It is not a request for an easy life. Jesus, himself, experienced utter poverty, and had to wrestle with the temptations of this world for 40 days in the desert (Luke 4). Others who have whole heartedly committed themselves to following Jesus have found that the journey inevitably involves sacrifice and hardship as well as the joys. But we simply cannot do this journey in our own strength. We need God's guiding. We need his intervention. We need his empowering as we make our pilgrimage to heaven. So prayer must be our starting point as we take each step of the journey.

Of course, the journey starts as we offer individual moments of temptation to him and ask for his help. But in time we need to develop an attitude in which all that makes up our daily lives is handed over to God for his help in determining how things work out. From my own experience, I can remember many occasions when I have felt myself to be vulnerable to temptation, and on those times when I asked for God's help to get through those moments, I have seen his intervention happen. Unfortunately, there have also been times when I did not ask for God's help or intervention, and on some of those occasions I was defeated.

When we see Jesus in the gospels calling his disciples they are given very little idea of where this calling will lead them. In faith they step out with Jesus and commit themselves to following wherever he leads. This attitude goes against our fallen nature that wants to determine how things go in our own lives. We want to deal with life on our own terms, to go where we want to go and do what we want to do. Like those alcoholics I mentioned earlier, we want to achieve our own goals through our own efforts/willpower. This instinct goes back to our early childhood when we pushed our parents away and tried to walk on our own without their help. However, to be serious about prayer means discovering our need and accepting our dependence on God. It means coming to terms with the fact that in building God's kingdom, either in ourselves or in the wider world, we are the junior party in this relationship. When Jesus says, *"And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one"*, he is not only referring to very obvious and specific situations that occur in our day to day lives that we need help with. He is talking about the whole journey away from the principalities of darkness towards the kingdom of light. Without God's help we simply cannot do this journey! With God's help the journey becomes possible.

## **Exercise**

In Luke 1: 26-38 we read the story of the announcement to Mary that she is going to be the mother of the promised Messiah. In all the glow of the Christmas celebrations, we should not forget that this was a potential death sentence on Mary. Joseph had the right to take her to the people and pronounce her an adulterer if he didn't believe that her pregnancy was due to a miracle happening. The punishment for adultery was death by stoning. But Mary was a woman who had faith in her God and in that moment of trial was able to abandon herself to God with the words, *"I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me according to your word."* She was praying a prayer of abandonment. Jesus also prayed that prayer as he awaited his torture and execution in the garden of Gethsemane with the words, *"My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will"* (Matthew 26: 39). And then later on the cross when he said, *"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit"* (Luke 23: 46).

Charles de Foucauld was a Priest and hermit who went to live amongst the Berber people of the Southern Sahara desert. He began his spiritual journey by going into churches and praying, *“God, if you exist, let me know it.”* But much later became known for his prayer of abandonment, *“Father, I abandon myself into your hands; do with me what you will. Whatever you may do, I thank you: I am ready for all, I accept all. Let only your will be done in me, and in all your creatures. I wish no more than this, O Lord. Into your hands I commend my soul; I offer it to you with all the love of my heart, for I love you, Lord, and so need to give myself, to surrender myself into your hands, without reserve, and with boundless confidence, for you are my Father.”* Of course, what made this man’s life so extraordinary was not this prayer that he regularly prayed, but the fact that he made every effort to live the prayer. He understood that we cannot separate our prayers from our actions. Our journey into prayer lasts a life time as our relationship with God grows and develops. The speed of that growth will depend on a variety of factors, but one of those will be our willingness to live our lives more radically in the service of God. To tread the path God leads us on to, wherever that may take us.

The exercise for this lesson continues to build on past lessons. You begin your quiet time by settling yourself down and quietening your mind, and then pray any of those prayers you have prayed before in this course. The prayer for this lesson is your own prayer of abandonment. You might like to use a version of Jesus’ words and say something like *“Father, into your hands I give this new day.”* Or you could join with others who use Charles de Foucauld’s prayer. Or you can make up your own prayer of abandonment to God. However, before you say these words, please take a moment to reflect on what you are doing when you hand over control of your life to God. Are you really willing to live it, as best you can, in obedience to his will? We all fail in this endeavour, and God knows that, but I think he loves to see us at least trying to follow in the footprints of his Son.

#### Exercise in brief:

- 1) Pray – give God this time you have set aside for him.
- 2) Sit still and spend a moment becoming attentive to God.
- 3) Ask God to help you become a person who loves him, yourself and others more.
- 4) Ask God to place on your heart the burdens he has on his heart for you to bear.
- 5) Ask God to help you empty your hands so that you can receive whatever he wants to give you.
- 6) Ask God to reveal the truth about any of your relationships with other people where repentance is needed.
- 7) [Ask God to help you abandon yourself to him.](#)
- 8) Close the exercise with a prayer of thanks.

#### Encouragement

*Jonathan writes...*

My most amazing answer to prayer happened when I had just returned from a year abroad where I had been studying. The whole year had been an act of faith, and God had really both blessed and challenged me through the experience. On returning home I found myself in a situation where I had no income, and quite a lot of regular bills to pay. I felt God was wanting me to work with the ‘poor and needy’, but for a while I didn’t know exactly which ‘poor and needy’ he wanted me to work with. Then one day I was checking the balance in my bank account via the internet and found

that I had run out of money. This was the crises moment for me, and as I sat there looking at my empty bank account I told God that the journey I was on was one of faith, and that I was trusting him to look after me financially.

Before I had even finished the prayer I heard the flip-flop of the letter box and I went downstairs to see what had arrived. I found that in one of the letters was an anonymous gift of £500. This was all the money I needed to see me through till I began my next job working with recovering alcoholics and drug users. Nothing like that had ever happened to me before and I was completely overjoyed by the gift of God. It also built my faith up quite a bit as well!

### **Sayings of the Desert Fathers/Mothers**

Abba Matoes, *"It is not through virtue that I live in solitude, but through weakness; those who live in the midst of men are the strong ones."*