



Lesson Eleven: Be persistent! Don't stop praying! Keep going!

Reflection/Discussion

I wonder how you got on with the prayer of abandonment? I think it's the sort of prayer that you can pray in the wider context of your life as well as the every-day context. When I was nineteen years old I spent several hours walking along the side of a river running through the city where I lived thinking about all that I might have to give up if I committed myself to following Jesus. I dreamt up the worst-case scenarios, and when I had reached as far as I could go with this exercise I concluded that I could and would still give my life to him. Later, when I had reached almost forty years of age, and much more experienced in life, I went through a similar process of review. This led me to tell God that I would go wherever he wanted me to go and do whatever he wanted me to do. God took me at my word because within a few years my life had dramatically changed direction. Both of these were prayers of abandonment.

But the prayer of abandonment is not just for those life changing moments. It is something we need to do on a regular basis, by our actions as well as our prayers, as we continue on our spiritual journey. Huggett puts it like this, *"I am a pilgrim. Pilgrims must be always on the move. A pilgrimage is a journey, often a steep ascent. I must face the challenge of the climb with a willingness to respond to the beckoning of God's finger no matter what it costs me. When he calls me to leave behind past securities and to face new challenges, I must obey, gladly and with child-like trust. Inherent in the Christian's calling is the belief that new life comes through death; the grain of wheat has to die so that it can produce new life. For the Christian, constant change is an inevitability."*¹ Sounds scary? The remedy to that is to discover the Father heart of the God who will walk every step of that journey with you.

We have now done ten different prayer exercises. For the first three lessons we concentrated on different ways of quietening ourselves as a form of preparation for spending time with God. This preparation time need not take long. In my own experience, as I have got better at quietening my thoughts and relaxing my body, so it has taken less time to prepare for prayer. After the first three lessons we then had a series of exercises in which we tried out different prayers we could pray. I see these as a series of conversations that we can have with God. I hope that they have given you some pointers in developing your prayer life so that it becomes an honest dialogue between who you really are in your heart, with the deep and mysterious heart of God. Throughout these exercises I hope you have come to know (if you haven't known already) that the first purpose of prayer is to build a friendship of love with God.

Teaching

¹ "Listening to God" by Joyce Huggett, 2005, page 140.

Luke 18: 1 – 8 *“Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said; “In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary.’*

For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, ‘Even though I don’t fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually wear me out with her coming!’

And the Lord said, ‘Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes will he find faith on the earth?’”

Finding God in every moment...

In his spiritual classic, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, Brother Lawrence, believed to be a Carmelite monk from the 17th century, describes the relationship he has with God through prayer. As a monk, Brother Lawrence had set times when he was supposed to pray, either on his own or with his fellow monks. But he found that it was the praying that he did outside of those times, when he focussed on the practice of the presence of God, which was the most significant in his daily walk with God. He wrote, *“I have quitted all forms of devotion and set prayers except those to which my duty obliges me. And I make it my business only to persevere in God’s presence; or, to speak more precisely, in an habitual, silent and secret conversation with God, which often causes me joy inwardly.”* Brother Lawrence developed the practice of turning his thoughts to God whenever he could. At first these reflective times were more meditations on Scripture and Christian doctrine, but as he grew to know God in this way so his heart warmed to God and his thoughts became more those of a lover, *“We must know before we can love. In order to know God, we must think of him, and when we come to love him, we shall then also think of him often, for in our heart will be our treasure.”*²

In his book, *Prayer and Contemplation*, Mark Gibbard writes something similar about having an on-going conversation with God, *“As we grow in love for God, our thoughts turn naturally to [him] at these times, like a lover thinking of his beloved.”* In this course I have suggested you set aside ten minutes each day to do the different exercises, but these ten minutes were intended only as a starting point! Our ultimate goal as pray-ers is to develop a way in which we can have a regular dialogue with God throughout the day. Gibbard also turns to Brother Lawrence for help with this subject. *“This brings me to the thing that I myself have most to learn from Brother Lawrence – to take my praying into the heart of my living in the world. We each have to discover our own way. It sounds obvious, but I have done so little about it. Brother Lawrence’s way is that ‘we should establish ourselves in a sense of God’s presence by continually conversing with him’.* The idea

² <http://www.practicegodspresence.com/brotherlawrence/practicegodspresence09.html>

might seem naïve if it meant telling God of what was going on; instead of meaning, as it does, honestly opening ourselves to him, so that his love can enter and continually transform our daily lives.”

Becoming a lover of God...

Does this idea of being focussed continuously on the presence of God seem impossible? I think it probably is, at least in this life! But there are things that we can do to help this process along. Firstly, we can learn to be increasingly present to the moment. This is a well known spiritual discipline. Rather than day dreaming about the future, or spending lots of time recalling the past, we learn to appreciate the value of the life we are experiencing at this moment in time. Certainly, there are things we can learn from the past, and plans that we need to make for the future, but God is with us right now, and we can miss that if our attention is elsewhere. Secondly, a lot of what we do each day does require us to concentrate on that particular job. At one point in my life I was a Computer Programmer, and it would have been impossible for me to be in a dialogue with God whilst my brain was engaged in solving software problems. Gibbard writes about William Temple’s attitude towards this problem. *“William Temple says that we should give our entire attention to [the] exacting tasks we have to do – and not to try to think of God then – or we should not do our best work. We should, he adds, start on those tasks refreshed by the thought of God’s love; and when the exertion is over, our minds should return to God.”* Archbishop William Temple, Gibbard writes, *“certainly stressed the need of prayer. ‘Life and prayer,’ he said in the university church at Oxford, ‘should be as closely as possible intertwined. God is the ultimate Reality who sustains all existence, including our own lives. To be in actual and living union with him is the fundamental business of life; and everything else follows from that.’”*

Richard Foster describes the prayer-filled life as *“beautiful of soul”*, or *“the steady gaze of the soul upon the God who loves us.”*³ Teresa of Avila wrote of it as being *“an intimate sharing between friends”*.⁴ What all these phrases add up to is the promise of a genuine friendship with the creator of the universe through prayer. To my mind, that is something worth working for! Such prayer will include making requests, which I admit I have not majored on in this course. I guess that I have assumed people know how to ask for things from God, which is a perfectly proper thing for us to do. In fact Jesus encourages us to be persistent in making our requests as we can see from the passage from Luke 18 above. However, our God is not like the unjust Judge who reluctantly gives the widow what she asks for in order to get her off his back. God is the loving Father who rejoices in opportunities to bless us in whatever way he can. It is the widow that we are supposed to be focussed on in this passage, and her determination to press on with her request until her burden is lifted from her. We certainly need to be more burdened by the things God wants us to talk to him about. However, we also need to understand that whilst repetition can be a part of prayer, prayer is not just about repeating our requests over and over again until we get what we ask for. Prayer is an essential part of our friendship with God and there are many ways to pray as I hope you have begun to discover on this course. But as Philip Yancey says in his excellent book on prayer, *“Jesus*

³ “Streams of Living Water” by Richard Foster, 1998, page49.

⁴ “The Life: The Collected Works of St Teresa, vol 1”, 1976, page 67.

*taught a model of prayer, the Lord's Prayer, but otherwise gave few rules. His teaching reduces down to three general principles: Keep it honest, keep it simple, and keep it up."*⁵

I hope that this course has given you a taster of what you can do in prayer. There are many ways to continue this journey from here. You might like to get together informally with others to pray and explore different forms of prayer. There are a huge number of books on prayer available, as well as those which explore the lives of the many spiritual giants in the history of the Christian church. I have listed at the bottom of these lesson notes those books I have drawn on in this course. Or perhaps you would like to gather a few friends together and have a go at my next course on prayer – **Prayer Eleven for Explorers** – available to download for free from the Prayer Eleven web site. Whatever you decide to do, I pray God will bless and encourage you on your own journey into a deeper friendship with him.

Encouragement

Jennifer writes...

I was desperate to have a child, but after months of failing to fall pregnant I was diagnosed with polycystic ovary syndrome. I was told that I would probably have to have IVF treatment. My husband and I decided to take a break from trying to conceive and we planned to move back to the USA for a new start, and to give me a chance to begin a career. However, as it turned out, I fell pregnant just before we were due to leave. I still used my tickets to go to a friend's wedding in the USA, but I miscarried the baby en route. When I returned home I was very angry at God; angry that he had allowed me to fall pregnant and then took the baby away from me. We tried to fall pregnant again, but to no avail. Then one Sunday, six months later, I said to the Lord, *"I need you to speak to me in church today. I need to know that you are there, and good luck because I am helping in Sunday School!"* I was embittered. But that Sunday they did not have very many children in church so they said I could go back into the service. The reading was about Elizabeth not being able to fall pregnant, but then God blessed her. There was also a song and a bit of the sermon which was also relevant. Then one of the church leaders got up and said, 'I think someone here needs to hear this', and he read this from the Bible, *"Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding"* (Proverbs 3: 5). Well, that was it. I ran to the Ladies' and cried. I asked the Lord's forgiveness for my hardened heart and anger, and asked him to help me lean on him and not on my own understanding; and if I was not meant to have children, to please take the desire away from me. I left there feeling a little sad, but also like a load had been lifted off me. I truly had *"let go and let God"* as they say, and I didn't have to wait long, I was pregnant with our son Benjamin 2 weeks later.

Sayings of the Desert Fathers/Mothers

Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him, *"Abba, as far as I can I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace and as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?"* Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands towards heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, *"If you will, you can become like flame."*

⁵ "Prayer – Does it make any difference?" by Philip Yancey, 2006, page 183.

Here is a list of books that have been quoted during this course:

- "Sayings of the Desert Fathers" translated by Benedicta Ward, SLG
- "Prayer and Contemplation" by Mark Gibbard
- "Spirituality Workbook" by David Runcorn
- "Listening to God" by Joyce Huggitt
- "From Wild Man to Wise Man – Reflections on Male Spirituality" by Richard Rohr
- "Letters to Marc about Jesus" by Henri Nouwen
- "Becoming Human" by Jean Vanier
- "What's So Amazing About Grace?" by Philip Yancey
- "Becoming Christ – Transformation through Contemplation" by Brain C. Taylor
- "Personal Prayer According to the Monastic Tradition" by Columban Heaney
- "Celebration of Discipline" by Richard Foster
- "Rees Howells Intercessor" by Norman Grubb
- "Living Prayer" by Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh
- "Answers to Prayer" by George Müller
- "School for Prayer" by Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh
- "12½ Steps to Spiritual Health" by Howard Astin
- "Prayer – Does it make any difference?" by Philip Yancey
- "The Practice of the Presence of God" by Brother Lawrence
- "Streams of Living Water" by Richard Foster