



Lesson Seven: When you meet with God...open your heart to him.

Reflection/Discussion

In the fourth chapter of the book of Revelation, we are given a wonderful picture of humble worship. In the centre of this picture is the throne of God. However well John describes the scene using worldly images, I am sure it does not come close to the reality of his experience of God's glory! Around the throne are the strange living creatures that see everything, calling out day and night, *"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is, and is to come."* Then come the twenty-four elders, those who represent the human race before God. The crowns on their heads witness to us the height God always intended for us to achieve. As King David said, *"When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what are mere mortals that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned them with glory and honour"* (Psalm 8: 3-5). So now we return to Revelation where John continues to describe the scene before him. *"Whenever the living creatures give glory, honour and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: 'You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being'"* (Revelation 4: 9-11).

In the last exercise we came forward and bowed down before Jesus in our imagination. Perhaps you physically enacted this out? That place of humble worship is where we were made to be, and we would do well to reflect on this scene from Revelation. It will help us to get so much in our lives into a true perspective.

Teaching

Matthew 6: 10b *"your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."*

The treasure that costs us everything...

In the last lesson we focussed on God's kingdom coming in fullness into our own lives, rather than into the world – although the two are intimately connected. In the same way, in this lesson, we are going to focus on what it means for God's will to be done in us and through us. God made us unique, firstly for the relationship we can have with him, but also for the role he intends for us to play in his kingdom. *"For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do"* (Ephesians 2:10). The problem is that in order to gain the relationship in its fullness, and to be fulfilled in doing those 'good works' God had in mind for us to

do, we need to let go of everything else. *“Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus”* (Philippians 3: 13-14). We need to become single-hearted when the reality is that we desire many things, which may not in themselves be bad, but which distract us from being the person whom God would have us be.

In 1931, William Temple, who was then Archbishop of York, was leading a service at the University Church in Oxford to celebrate the end of the Oxford Mission. The congregation was singing the hymn *“When I Survey the Wondrous Cross”*, and just before the final verse Temple stopped the singing and invited the congregation to read the words of this verse.

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.*

“Now,” Temple said, “if you mean them with all your heart, sing them as loud as you can. If you don’t mean them at all, keep silent. If you mean them even a little and want to mean them more, sing them very softly.” The organ played and two thousand voices whispered!

In Matthew 13: 44 Jesus says, *“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.”* Notice it is with *“joy”* that the man sells all he has in order to buy the field which holds the treasure. The problem for many of us is that we have little appreciation for the true value of this hidden treasure. We need God’s help to both discover and make use of this treasure. But fear gets in the way of this process as we focus on what we might have to sell, or give up, in order to buy the field. Like those people William Temple was talking to, we struggle to pursue God’s will with all our heart. Sometimes it takes a life changing experience brought on by tragedy or hardship before we are willing to let go of those things that prevent us moving forward with God. The Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh, in his book *“Living Prayer”* writes the following: *“‘Thy will be done’ is not a submissive readiness to bear God’s will, as we often take it to be. It is the positive attitude of those who have gone through the wilderness, who have entered the Promised Land and who set out to make the will of God present and real on earth as it is in heaven. St Paul says that we are a colony of heaven (Philippians 3: 20; Moffat’s translation). He means a group of people whose mother city is heaven, who are on earth to conquer it for God and to bring the kingdom of God if only to a small spot. It is a peculiar type of conquest, which consists in winning over people to the realm of peace, making them subject to the prince of peace and making them enter into the harmony which we call the kingdom of God. It is indeed a conquest, a peacemaking that will make us sheep amongst wolves, seeds scattered by the sower, which must die in order to bear fruit and to feed others.”*

When Jesus was in the garden of Gethsemane awaiting those who would come to arrest and eventually execute him, he prayed to his Father, *“yet not my will, but yours be done”* (Luke 22: 42). Jesus did not want the suffering that awaited him in the immediate future. After all, he had just previously prayed, *“Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me”*. In Hebrews 12: 2 it says of Jesus that, *“For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”* In other words Jesus had single-mindedly set his heart on the

treasure of the kingdom that was to be his inheritance, and in the light of that treasure any sacrifice he had to make was worth making.

Letting go of wrong desires...

In Matthew 6: 19-21 Jesus said, *“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”* I doubt if there are many of us who would claim to be truly ‘sold out’ for God. We desire God, yet we desire other things as well. The world in this life has a lot of good things to offer us. I sometimes wonder if God, in his abundance, didn’t overdo it when he created so many wonderful things capable of distracting our hearts from him who gave us those things! These other desires take hold of us, demanding our attention and loyalty, our time and our love, and they inevitably affect the way we pray. As the writer puts it rather strongly in James 4: 1-4, *“What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. You adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.”*

Contrast this attitude with that of John the Baptist, who really had given up any pursuit after the pleasures of this world. When John’s disciples complained to him that the people were now going to Jesus to hear him preach and be baptised, John did not fight for his ‘ministry’ (the one thing he had left in the world that he might have felt tempted to hold on to), he simply replied *“A person can receive only what is given from heaven”* (John 3: 27). All John needed was what God had in mind to give him. He had discovered the hidden treasure of heaven which had become the centre of his hearts desire, and he had let go of any other desire which might distract him from that treasure.

What we can do...

I suspect that John the Baptist was the sort of person who would make most of us Christians feel uncomfortable! How can we possibly be like him in this way? Well, this is not something that can happen overnight. One decision we can make is to live a life committed to inward and outward simplicity (one of the spiritual disciplines I listed in the last lesson), and with God’s help, the things of this world can become less important to us as our relationship with him grows in importance.¹ Then as we learn to walk with God, so our eyes will be opened and we will find ourselves changing so that our desires increasingly mirror the heart of God, and we will be praying prayers that please him. God’s ways will become more important to us as we discover that we cannot become kingdom people by being un-kingdom-like! If we want the peace of God we must become lovers and ambassadors of peace. If we crave the company of a humble God, we must travel down the road of humility for ourselves. If we long for the friendship of him who was willing to die for us, we

¹ Richard Foster’s book “Freedom of Simplicity” is very good on this subject.

need to place our lives in the hands of the Father, and say with the confidence of one who knows how precious he or she is in God's sight, "Your will be done."

Exercise

Begin this exercise as you have done the previous ones. Settle down, get comfortable and quieten your thoughts. Put yourself in the mode of listening and being attentive to God. Speak to your Father and ask him to give you an ever bigger heart of love for him, for ourselves and for others. I cannot overstate the importance of our heart in prayer! It was out of God's heart of love that he spoke and creation came into being! There is no power in prayers that come from a hard heart! God can change your heart if you give him the freedom to do so. Perhaps there is someone in particular that you need to learn to love before you pray for them? God can help you to do this. Remember that to love someone does not necessarily involve having warm feelings for them. I was once given this helpful three-fold definition of love as: 1) valuing the person; 2) treating them with respect; 3) working for their good.

The next part of the exercise, if you feel able to do this, is to invite God to reveal the burdens he wishes to place on your heart. The book of Jeremiah reveals to us both an ordinary man with all his complaints and a desire for an easy life, but also a great prophet and servant of God who was prepared to let God use him in the work of his kingdom. We get both these sides of him in Jeremiah 20: 8-9, "*Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the LORD has brought me insult and reproach all day long. But if I say, 'I will not mention his word or speak anymore in his name,' his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.*" A burden is a strong desire in the heart for something good to happen. Jeremiah had a passion for his own people, and a deep concern for the way they were behaving. His desire was that the people of Israel would turn from their evil ways and hunger after God, and it was such a strong desire that he simply couldn't keep quiet about it. So in your next prayer, invite God to place on your heart the unique burden he has for you today. He might give you a deep concern for an individual you know who needs your help. He might give you a hunger for time to be alone with God on retreat. He might place a burden on your heart for a people-group that he wants you to pray for or support in some way. In time you will know in your heart the burdens God has placed there.

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) Close the exercise with a prayer of thanks.

Encouragement

George Müller 1805 – 1898

Müller was a man who believed that God would answer prayer when a person truly decided to live their lives trusting Him. Over many years Müller saw more than 10,000 of the poorest children grow up in the orphanages and schools he set up in Bristol, through the power of God in response to his prayers. Daily, the necessary money or other needs were met to maintain this great work as

Müller and his colleagues prayed together. The one rule they had was only ever to tell God of their needs through prayer and not to advertise them to others.

Today, the George Müller Foundation continues to abide by this rule and see amazing answers to prayer. On their web site (<http://www.mullers.org/cm/>) it says this about George Müller: *“It would be wrong to think that the answers to prayer that George Müller experienced were all easy and quick – the early part of his diaries show us that his experience was often far from that. Life was tough at times. But he learned to be persistent in and committed to the challenging task that God set him – that of demonstrating the faithfulness of God in prayer, often in the most miraculous of circumstances. He says however in his diaries later in his life that he had documentary evidence that he had had 50,000 answers to prayer and went on to say something even more remarkable – that 30,000 of those prayers had been answered in 24 hours or less.”*

In his book, “Answers to Prayer” Müller begins by explaining how he would work out what it was God’s will for him to pray. *“I seek at the beginning to get my heart into such a state that it has no will of its own in regard to a given matter. Nine-tenths of the trouble with people generally is just here. Nine-tenths of the difficulties are overcome when our hearts are ready to do the Lord’s will, whatever it may be.”* Müller then explains that through prayer, reflection and Bible study he would, *“come to a deliberate judgement according to the best of my ability and knowledge, and if my mind is thus at peace, and continues so after two or three more petitions, I proceed [to pray] accordingly. In trivial matters, and in transactions involving most important issues, I have found this method always effective.”*

Sayings of the Desert Fathers/Mothers

Abba Nilus *“Do not be always wanting everything to turn out as you think it should, but rather as God pleases, then you will be undisturbed and thankful in your prayer.”*