

Explorers in Prayer – Lesson Plan One

The Place of Attention and Listening in Prayer

The aims of this class are as follows:

- 1) To deal with any practical issues relating to the course.
- 2) To give an overview of the way the course is going to go.
- 3) To explain the three principles of the prayer course.
- 4) To share communion together.
- 5) To open up the idea that there is much more to prayer than just asking for things.
- 6) To explain the importance of attention and listening in prayer.
- 7) To offer some practical exercises to be done in class and at home.

Supplementary items to take to class:

- 1) Tea/coffee (This would probably just be for the first class).
- 2) Course books and Prayer Journals (Course books are essential, Prayer Journals are not).
- 3) Communion elements (if you are having communion).
- 4) Three boat pictures.
- 5) You may want to take some pens/pencils.
- 6) Box of tissues.

Note for the course leader

- 1) You may feel it worthwhile asking the students to switch off their mobile phones or put them on to vibration if they need to keep them on.
- 2) You should make it clear that this is NOT so much an academic course as a spiritual journey you are all going on together. As course leader you should find yourself learning as much as the others who are doing the course.
- 3) Be aware that some people will have come to the first lesson with wrong expectations about what they are committing themselves to. My advice is that you do not try to persuade them to stay on the course if they want to leave. Better to leave at the beginning than later on.

Arrive/welcome - cup of tea/coffee/biscuits

Introductions

Course Leader: Say a little bit about yourself and explain that this course is a journey which you will all travel on together; that you will all have something to learn from the experience.

Course members: Each person shares something about themselves, why they want to do the course and, perhaps in one or two sentences, how they would describe their prayer life?

End of Introductions

Note for the course leader

You want to get people used to sharing their thoughts with the group as soon as possible. They need to be comfortable as a group as they will be doing quite a bit of praying together for the duration of the course.

Business Stuff

1) Course book (Distribute books and collect money off people if necessary).

Note for the course leader

Whilst most students really enjoy the book *Prayer – Finding the Heart's True Home* by Richard Foster, others have found it difficult to get in to. I suggest that everyone should start by trying to read the book, but if they find it too difficult then they should read a different book on prayer. They can share with the class what they have learnt from the book each week.

2) Prayer journals (Distribute prayer journals if you wish to do so. Not everyone finds prayer journals helpful so this is not compulsory).

Note for the course leader

The prayer journals I have got for my students have come from a company called Paperchase. They have a series of A6 lined notebooks with attractive covers which the course members have appreciated. See link: www.paperchase.co.uk (I don't get any commission!)

Different uses for the prayer journal...

- a. Write down any reflections on the prayer exercises.
- b. Note any points for feedback to course/group leader.
- c. Note things you have learnt from the course book.
- d. Jot down any thoughts that come to you about prayer.

3) Confidentiality – discuss the importance of confidentiality within the group.

Note for the course leader

I also tend to advise students not to discuss what they have done on the course with others that might want to do the course the next time it is run.

4) If any of the students want to form prayer triplets/partners for the duration of the course now is the time to organise this. This is not compulsory but there are additional weekly exercises for those who want to.

5) Explain how the meeting will start each week - the course leader will arrange for the group to sit in a circle around a low table with a lit candle in the middle of the table. He will also put unlit tea lights around the candle according to the number of students. The room should be in silence as each student enters the room for the start of the lesson. They will then light one of the tea lights from the central candle, put it on the table near the candle, take a seat and wait in silence for the lesson to begin.

End of Business Stuff

Course Overview

Over the next eleven weeks we are going to examine, discuss and practice through exercises a variety of forms of Christian prayer. It will require some level of personal discipline to enter into the exercises, both in and out of class, but as is the rule with so much in life, we will each get out of this course according to what we put into it. There is no test to take at the end of the course, or pass mark to achieve. The course can be considered a success if we find that we have learnt something which will be useful for our personal prayer life, and therefore our relationship with God.

The first three lessons will focus on our relationship with God through prayer. Prayer and our relationship with God are inevitably linked as 1) the primary purpose of prayer is to draw us deeper into that relationship with God and, 2) it is through our relationship with God that we will learn to pray the kind of prayers that God wants us to pray.

The second group of three lessons will take us through the *Lectio Divina*. This is a traditional Christian practice in which prayer emerges from our reading of the Bible, which we believe to be God's living word. In these lessons we will see how prayer is key to the process of spiritual transformation in our life journey.

The next four lessons will look at ways in which prayer is an essential part of the ministry that God calls each of us to. We will see how it is important to have the right attitudes towards prayer, and we will be challenged to put what we have learnt into action.

In the final lesson we will look back on the course and see how God has taught each of us new things about prayer, and revealed something more of his desire for friendship with us.

Question: Any questions?

End of Course Overview

Communion

At this point it would be good to have a short act of communion. People with different church backgrounds will choose to do this differently. The important thing is that, at the beginning of our journey, we are forming a bond with each other as a group, and declaring through this act of communion that we will support each other on the journey. I have provided a simple communion service sheet that you can download and use if you wish to.

End of Communion

Personality and Prayer

Introvert, extrovert or omnivert?... ('Omni' means 'combining all')

How we pray will be effected by our personality. Most books on prayer and spirituality are written by introverts for introverts, and hence the emphasis is often on silence, which many extroverts find difficult. The point of silence is that it helps people be attentive to God by removing distractive noise. For those who are extrovert, they are more likely to hear God

from within the noise. Whilst we may be more inclined towards introversion or extroversion, the truth is that we will all have within us some of the characteristics of both.

In the book *Spirituality for Extroverts* by Nancy Reeves, she uses the word 'omnivert' to describe this combination. An omnivert will be sensitive to God's voice in both the silence and the noise. Jesus could be described as an omnivert. He loved spending time with people in a variety of social settings, and could see or hear what his Father was doing in that environment. But he also loved to go away to a quiet place to be alone with his Father. Nancy Reeves writes, "Any intentional activity that turns our awareness more fully to the divine is a spiritual practice." So if we enter into silence, or sit down for a conversation with a godly person, we can equally be attentive to, or turning our awareness to the divine, with the view to listening or receiving something from him.

Question: Do people in the group know if they are introvert or extrovert? Perhaps there have been periods in their lives when they were more introvert, and at other times more extrovert? Perhaps they might consider themselves an omnivert? Discuss...

These characteristics of extroverts/introverts may be helpful for the discussion:

Extrovert

More at home in the outer world of people and things.

Energised by other people.

Develops ideas through discussion.

Introvert

More at home in the inner world of thoughts and reflections.

Energised through being alone.

Develops ideas through reflection.

End of Personality and Prayer

Main Talk (The three prayer principles)

The three sailing boats illustration...

The first picture of a boat has the sail down. This illustrates the Christian who struggles to find time for prayer. The wind of the Spirit blows but very little happens with the Christian.

The second picture of a boat has the sail pulled partially up the mast. This Christian is giving some priority to prayer and so is spiritually moving a little, but only slowly.

The third picture of a boat has the sail up to the top of the mast. This Christian is serious about prayer and so things are really moving in their life spiritually.

Question: Have there been moments in your spiritual life when things seemed to be happening a lot more than at other times?

Quote from E. M. Bounds "Praying men have been God's vicegerents on earth; ...prayerless men have never been used of him."

Note for the course leader

Please download the three boat pictures from the web site and print them off to illustrate the point.

Dictionary definition of 'vicegerents' – "a person appointed to exercise all or some of the authority of another."

The three prayer principles of the course...

Prayer Principle One - our prayer lives will always be imperfect so we shouldn't feel bad about it. Our motivation for developing our prayer lives should not be guilt, but rather a desire for a closer friendship with God through prayer.

Prayer Principle Two - we must pace ourselves like a long distance runner, not like a sprinter because:

- 1) Our journey into prayer will be as long as the life we live.
- 2) It takes a long time to learn and see the progress we are making.
(This principle will come up again in lessons 7 and 10.)

Prayer Principle Three - if we approach God with **love** and **humility**, and give him our **time** and **attention** in prayer, both we and our relationship with God will grow.

Humility – Moses was a very humble man and he spoke to God face to face. (Numbers 12: 3; Exodus 33: 11)

Becoming attentive to God...

In the following story God uses both silence and noise as a way of getting Elijah's attention in order to communicate with him.

I Kings 19: 7 - 13 (TNIV)

And the word of the LORD came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."

The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Quote from *The MacArthur Bible Commentary* about the above passage... "The lesson for Elijah was that Almighty God was quietly, sometimes imperceptibly, doing his work in Israel." Prayer is a part of that imperceptible work which God calls us to join him in doing.

So, what is required is that we become more attentive to God. Silence is simply a way into being attentive. A teacher will call their class into silence so that they can attend to what the teacher has to say. The same is with God.

Habakkuk 2: 20 (TNIV)

"The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him."

St Anthony did a 20 year retreat in the desert, as referred to in a mini biography of him by Richard Foster in his book *Streams of Living Water*,

Note for the course leader

The following section on St Anthony is on the handout so only use it if you want to.

“Throughout this process of desert temptation the role of spiritual discipline was prominent. In fact, the very purpose of going into the desert was for training in spiritual discipline. This life involved solitude and fasting for the sake of intense, internal focus; meditation and prayer for the sake of deepening spiritual communion; Scripture study and reflection for the sake of the transformation of the mind; and manual labour and exorcism for the sake of doing the works of the Father.

Now, the purpose of these Disciplines of the Spiritual Life was to train the body and the soul in righteousness. This, in turn, produced established men and women who could stand firm in the time of trial.

We find this kind of character formation in abundance in Anthony. His biographer writes, ‘It was not his physical dimensions that distinguished him from the rest, but the stability of character and the purity of the soul. His soul being free of confusion, he held his outer senses also undisturbed, so that from the soul’s joy his face was cheerful as well.’ Anthony became characterised as ‘tolerant in disposition and humble of soul’. In fact, so striking was the transformation of his life that ‘simply by seeing his conduct, many aspired to become imitators of his way of life’. This was the fruit God produced in him from the years of solitude in the desert.”

Question: What examples in the bible are there where God speaks to people through dreams?

It is in the silence and stillness of the night that dreams can come.

One of the fundamental principles of this course is that we actually try out what we have learnt, so I want to suggest that we have a noise fast for the duration of the course. Or, in other words, try and reduce the amount of back ground noise in our life. Switch off the radio in the car, etc. For some people this will be harder than others depending on their circumstances, but most people will be able to make some change to the amount of background noise they live with. In one of the chapters of Richard Foster’s book that we are going to be reading this week, he refers to steps which St Benedict laid down for his monks as a way of gaining a deeper relationship with God. “Three of the steps deal with our use of the tongue, underscoring the importance of this single aspect of our lives. We are to cultivate silence, avoid frivolous talk, and use plain simple speech.”

End of Main Talk

So to summarise this week’s lesson:

- 1) Prayers, and our relationship with God, are inevitably linked as the primary purpose of prayer is to draw us deeper into that relationship, and out of that relationship will come the prayers God wants us to pray.
- 2) The commitment, in terms of priority, time and effort that we give to prayer will determine how we will grow as Christians, and how our relationship with God will grow.

3) The three essential elements for a prayerful life are **love**, **humility** and a willingness to detach ourselves from the preoccupations of this world in order to give God our **time** and **attention**.

End of Summary

Home work

Distribute the handouts.

Individual Exercise: This is an exercise in simply giving God our time and attention (In this case 15 minutes each day). The idea is to find a place where you can sit in silence with God and simply BE there with him. Don't use this time to read anything or to think about chores that need to be done. By all means pray if there's something you want to say to him, but don't feel like you need to say anything. Some people may find it helpful to imagine themselves sat on a park bench with Jesus, just quietly enjoying the view together. Others will find they prefer to actually spend their 15 minutes sat on a bench in a public place.

Read Invitation and chapters 1 & 6 of the course book.

Prayer Triplet Exercise: Spend about twenty minutes in silence, waiting on God. If anyone feels God is prompting them to say something they should say it. Keep it brief. No one should respond to this, but wait for their own thing to say. Responses can come after the silence is over (this exercise is very similar to what Quakers do in their meetings, only they usually have a period of an hour in silence).

And finally...

The class will end with a 5 minute silence. This is simply an exercise in obtaining internal silence. There is nothing magical about quietening the sounds in our head. It is simply a practical discipline. It would be very hard having a useful conversation with someone when others are trying to talk to you, or there's a lot of back ground noise. In the same way prayer feels quite different when there is only one voice speaking in your head, which is your voice speaking to God; and when you stop there is silence. For this exercise the students are encouraged to sit quietly for this period of time and focus their mind on what their ears can hear, listening to the smallest sounds around them. They should try to not think about these sounds, just listen to them. In this way we are saying with Samuel "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." 1 Samuel 3:10.

Note for the course leader

When the exercise is finished you will find it worthwhile asking each person how they got on with creating silence in their heads. Some will have found it easy and others will have found it very hard.

After Class Notes: