

Explorers in Prayer – Lesson One Notes

The Place of Attention and Listening in Prayer

The aim of this course is firstly to develop our relationship with God so that our praying comes out of that relationship and is not separate from it.

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

Personality and prayer...

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

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 being attentive to, or turning our awareness to the divine, with the view to listening or receiving something from him.

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*, "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 rights, '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."

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."

In Summary...

- 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**.

Home work

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).