

Explorers in Prayer – Lesson Ten Handout

The Place of Intercession in Prayer - Praying with Grace.

The word 'grace' is defined in my dictionary as "the free and unmerited favour of God shown towards men and women." So when we pray, we are praying in the context of an unmerited relationship with God.

In fact the very act of praying stems from the unmerited desire that God has put on our hearts to pray. Without God giving us the desire to pray we would have no relationship with him through prayer.

His complete forgiveness of our sins is also unmerited. God is not a reluctant or grudging forgiver. He longs to forgive us because he knows that through forgiveness our relationship with him is able to exist and grow.

Every answer to a request we make of God, or every gift we ask God for, or every blessing we seek from God, is an unmerited answer, gift or blessing. We are given it because God's grace makes it possible for his love to be poured out on us.

Then, again, the only reason we are able to hear God, or sense his involvement in our lives is because he chooses to reveal himself to us. This too is an unmerited gift.

Our God is a grace-filled God. His desire is to bless us whether or not we deserve it, and his calling on us is to become grace-filled people like him. But grace is costly! In the first chapter of his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer explains costly grace. "Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ." In a previous lesson we have talked about the place of suffering in prayer, but this costly following of Jesus is suffering of a different kind. It is not so much feeling the suffering of others and, out of compassion, praying for them. It is the kind of suffering that we personally will go through as we allow God to undermine our previously held attitudes and beliefs; our prejudices and assumptions. It is the suffering that comes when God challenges us to let go of anger or bitterness towards others and replace any attitude that lowers the value of another person in our eyes, with an attitude of love that lifts that other person up. Such a challenge flies in the face of all that our sinful human nature might want to do.

In his excellent book *What's so Amazing About Grace?* Philip Yancey tells the story of his friend Mel. After a friendship of many years Mel announced, to Yancey's great surprise, that he was gay. It took Yancey a while to think through what his own attitude towards Mel should be, and as this process was going on he was able to observe the lack of grace that so many Christians were showing towards his friend. Reading through the gospels again Yancey saw how Jesus did not react to the outcasts of society in the way that many Christians were reacting to Mel. Grace meant that Jesus could see the potential in everyone he met and loved them for it. He concluded that particular chapter with these words: "All of us in the church need 'grace-healed eyes' to see the potential in others for the same grace that God has so lavishly bestowed on us. 'To love a person,' said Dostoevsky, 'means to see him as God intended him to be.'"

In the work I used to do with the homeless alcoholics and drug users, I found myself wrestling with what we might call the issue of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor. We feel sorry for the person who, through no fault of their own, have become ill, or have lost their job, or have been born into an abusive family, etc. Our compassion reaches out to people like that and we try to help where we can. But how do we feel about those who seem to have brought their problems on themselves? We might consider those people undeserving of our compassion and help. Do we quote from St Paul, "If a man will not work, he shall not eat." (2 Thessalonians 3:10)? Do we harden our hearts to

such people? Or do we see these people as God sees us - equally in need of his grace? In fact, grace prayers have a more positive impact on the pray-er than they do on the person being prayed for. The pray-er prays a blessing on that person, and that person is blessed through the prayer, but the pray-er is blessed even more. This is the mystery - that as we bless those we find the most difficult in life something changes in our heart towards that person and we ultimately end up being the more blessed by our prayers. Jesus is quoted by Paul in Acts 20: 35 as saying “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” A grace prayer gives something good to someone who may be entirely undeserving, but through the act of praying we end up receiving an even greater blessing.

Individual Exercise: Practice the prayer of reflection that we did as an exercise in class. If your prayer time is in the morning, spend the fifteen minutes reflecting on the previous day’s activity. If your prayer time is at the end of the day then reflect back on the day you have just had. Thank God for people and good things that happened. Repent of things that need repenting of. Try to feel God’s heart as he guides you through the day showing you the things he wants you to see, the people he wants you to pray for, or perhaps even some practical thing that he may be wanting you to do.

Read chapters 16 & 21 of the course book.

Also for the next lesson...

With the next lesson being the last of the course, there are some things that we will be doing which you should think about over the next week:

- i. At the beginning of next week’s class I shall be asking you to give a reflection on something that may have struck you about prayer as we have done the course together.
- ii. I will also ask you to ask one question about prayer that has been on your mind, OR talk about an area of prayer, perhaps one that we have looked at, which you would like to explore further in your own time.
- iii. At the end of the class we will be spending some time praying for each other so please think about two things you think God would like us to pray with you for. The first can be anything, but the second should be for something God may be putting on your heart to be persistent in prayer for in the months or years ahead.

Prayer Triplet Exercise: This is the last prayer triplet gathering of the course. Jesus said “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” John 15:7. Spend some time discussing this passage. Is there anything that is getting in the way of us ‘abiding’ in Jesus? Pray about this for each other. Then place your own requests before the others in your triplet before lifting them together before God.

A reminder of the three principles of the prayer 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.