

Explorers in Prayer – Lesson Ten Notes

Note from Last Weeks Reading

In chapter 17 Foster refers to the story of Moses praying for the Israelite army in their battle with the Amalekites (Exodus 17: 8-13). This is a great example of when intercessory prayer needs to be persistent. Moses didn't just say a prayer for the army and then send them off to fight while he waited back at camp. He had to persist in prayer all the way through the battle, from a position where he could see what was going on and what he needed to pray for. He persisted in this work of prayer through the whole day until this threat to the Israelite community was overcome. There is a place for this kind of persistent prayer!

The Place of Intercession in Prayer – Praying with Grace

One day I was walking in the city where I used to live and I met two men I knew from my work with alcoholics and drug users. These men were alcoholics and were standing outside a store where they planned to buy some more drink. We got into a conversation in which one told me about his prayer life – what he said to God and what God said to him – and the other told me about the three times he goes to church each week. I had known these guys for a couple of years, but as I stood talking to them something suddenly occurred to me. Despite the mess that their lives were in (one of them will probably not live more than a few years unless he stops drinking), they had one thing which was of eternal significance; they had a relationship with God. “That” I thought as I walked away, “is grace.” Neither of these guys had lived useful or productive lives. Neither could make a claim on God that they had done anything to deserve his attention, his love or salvation. Yet in that moment I sensed that they had all three. Whilst those of us who try to live nice respectable lives may be tempted to think God owes us something. These two guys knew they had done nothing to deserve anything from God, yet they also knew that God still loved and cared about them.

God's grace means that we do not have to wait until we are reasonably 'sorted out' before he wants to have a relationship with us. He wants to have a relationship with each of us right now, no matter what state we are in. Neither does he insist we become transformed overnight once our relationship with him has begun. He is extraordinarily patient with us, gently helping us to move forward slowly, and picking us up when we fall down. We have far less patience with ourselves than God has with us! We may get angry with ourselves when we fail, but God doesn't react in the same way. Often, what we are doing when we think God is angry with us is projecting our own lack of patience on to him. In the same way, when we feel that God is judging us, we may be simply projecting our own judgmental attitude on to him. I used to wonder at how Jesus enjoyed spending time with 'sinners' and the sorts of people that most nice church-going Christians would tend to steer clear of. I also used to wonder at how the 'sinners' enjoyed spending time with Jesus, rather than feel condemned whenever they came into his presence. But through reflecting on the grace of God I have come to see he is able to see past all the 'bad' things that we are so focussed on in ourselves and others, and sees instead the simple desire in a person to live in relationship with him, despite their tendency to do all the wrong things!

In an earlier lesson we looked at how we can grow in our effectiveness as a pray-er as we grow in godliness. Whilst this is true, we do not have to be at all godly for God to listen when we genuinely cry out to him. A parent may be annoyed with their child for behaving

badly, but they will still run to their rescue if the child cries for help. When the thief on the cross next to Jesus asked to be remembered by Jesus in his kingdom, Jesus told him his prayer was answered, and he would soon be with Jesus in paradise. That was also grace. However, there are things that can get in the way of grace, and the most significant ones are pride and hard heartedness (see **Prayer Principle Three** – approaching God with humility and love). Some people, lacking humility, make out their lists of demands and tell God why he should give them what they ask for. Others, in their self-hatred, hesitate to ask God for anything. The fact is that we are in no position to demand things from God (boldness – Yes, demanding – No), but neither should we shrink from asking. Because of grace God is able to place a very high value and status on us that we do not deserve, which makes possible a relationship with him in which we are allowed (and encouraged) to speak to him about anything and everything that is on our hearts.

Our relationship with God is one of grace...

Christianity is the only religion that has at its centre a theology of grace; we cannot work our way into God's good books, we cannot earn our salvation, it can only come to us as a gift.

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.

Over the past nine weeks we have worked hard to give God 15 minutes of our time each day and do a series of prayer exercises. None of this earns a gift from God, but it is a part of our response to God's unmerited gift to us. When Christian mystics have gone out to live in desert caves for many years it has not been to earn their gift from God; it has been their response to the gift. It has been their gift back to God – like the children who give their parents Christmas presents, bought with the pocket money their parents gave to them. We cannot give God an unmerited gift (in his case it is always merited) but we can give him a gift. Like the Christmas carol says, "Yet what I can I give him, give him my heart." Part of that gift we give to God is our willingness to detach ourselves from the things of this world in order to give him some of our **time** and **attention** (**Prayer Principle Three**).

We then did a short exercise in class which went as follows:

Firstly, everyone took 30 seconds to think about who is the person they most disliked, or who has hurt them the most, or who irritates them the most, etc. They didn't spend any time thinking about this person or the problems associated with them. The point was just to identify who this person was. (If you can't think of anyone you know personally, perhaps there is someone in the news who has done something very bad that you could pray a grace prayer for.)

Secondly, they imagined God standing next to them, saying to them, "I have a burning desire to do something for this person that will really bless them. Do you have any suggestions?"

Thirdly, they thought for a moment about the best gift that could be given to this person which would truly bless them and make them happy. They then in prayer asked God to give such a gift to this person.

We then had a discussion about how it felt to do this exercise.

The above exercise was an example of what I call a "grace prayer".

The best example of a grace prayer in the bible is when Jesus is on the cross and he says in Luke 23: 34, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." In fact, his death on the cross is exactly that statement being acted out. Jesus doesn't just pray with his lips but with his actions too. When Jesus said in Matthew 5:44, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," he links grace prayers with acts of grace – doing good to those who would do harm to us. Then in the next verse he tells us why we should do this, "that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and send rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."

Our God of grace calls us to become a people of grace...

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. We want bad things to happen to those we consider bad, but by grace we pray for good things to happen instead. We want vengeance, but by grace we pray for a blessing. We want what we consider to be justice, but by grace we pray for mercy. When I pray prayers like this I sometimes see in my imagination a little cartoon character of the devil stomping off in a fury because he knows my grace prayer has the power to foil his attempt at hardening my heart towards others. It is in the nature of grace prayers that they will gradually have the effect of softening our hearts towards people who have hurt or offended us in some way. As pray-

ers it is very important that we have soft and compassionate hearts if we are going to feel the heart God has for those he wants us to pray for.

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.

Home work

Individual Exercise: When I first desired to spend more time with God in prayer I found it quite a difficult thing to do, mainly because I didn't really know how to make good use of the time. There are always people and things to pray for but making and using prayer lists can get quite boring after a while! So using the following exercise enabled me to gradually increase the length of my prayer time as I enjoyed sharing my reflections with God.

To do this exercise you should become silent and still, and then reflect on the events of the day that has just passed and talk to God about them. Try to keep in mind that there may be things that have happened which you should thank God for, ask for his forgiveness for, or make a specific request about, etc. You may find it helpful to go through the events in chronological sequence, but you should also feel free to go off at tangents whenever you want to. This free flowing way of praying gives God the space to speak to us about anything he wants to draw our attention to. 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. 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.