

Explorers in Prayer – Lesson Eleven Notes

End of Course Review – Becoming a friend of God

Here is a summary of what we have been doing over the last ten weeks...

In the first lesson we looked at the three prayer principles of this course (which I shall come to in a minute) and then went on to consider the place of attention and listening in prayer. Just as a teacher will tell their students to be silent in order to be attentive to what they are saying, so we need to find ways to become more attentive to God if we are going to hear his still, quiet voice. Often that involves silence, but for the more extrovert amongst us it will be about learning to be attentive in the midst of a busy and noisy life.

In the second lesson we looked at the place of praise and thanksgiving in prayer and saw how these things require us to be both humble and trusting of God. God may not have given us the things we would like, or he may have allowed us to experience some pretty bad things. But God wants us to become like Habakkuk who said, “**Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior.**” (Habakkuk 3:17-18)

In the third lesson we looked at the place of repentance and godliness in prayer. We saw how there is a strong link between the effectiveness of our prayer lives and how we live our lives as Christians. The key bible verse here is James 5:16 “**The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.**” This issue was raised again in chapter 16 of last week’s readings. Foster makes it clear that we do not have to achieve a special state of holiness before God will listen to our prayers. However, our sinfulness does “**separate us from God, rupturing the intimate fellowship and dulling our spiritual sensitivities...The result is an inability to discern the heart of God and an asking that is askew. We ask wrongly, to spend it on our passions, as James reminds us (James 4:3). Therefore our prayers are hindered.**” We will obviously fail to live godly lives in every respect, but that is where repentance comes in. In repentance we bring out into the open, into the light, that which we would rather keep in the dark, and by doing this we allow God, through his Holy Spirit, to do his redeeming work in our lives.

In the fourth lesson we looked at the place of Scripture and Icons in prayer. This was also the first of three parts of the *Lectio Divina*. We saw how Christians have seen scripture as a way in which God communicates with us, and out of which our response to him in prayer can be formed. We then looked at Icons and saw how the seventh Ecumenical Council of the Christian church declared that “**Icons do with colour what Scripture does with words.**” Whereas Western Christian spirituality became focussed on the art of listening for God, Eastern Christian spirituality focussed on the art of growing in love with God through gazing at him through the use of Icons.

In the fifth lesson we looked at the place of meditation in prayer. Whilst there are many forms of meditation, we looked at how the goal of specifically Christian meditation is always to grow in love with God. We then looked at two forms of Christian meditation, the eastern Christian form of meditation known as the *Jesus Prayer*, and the Western Christian form of meditation practised in the *Lectio Divina* in which we went through a portion of the story of Jonah a few verses at a time and reflected on, and prayed through, those verses as we went.

In the sixth lesson we looked at the place of contemplation in prayer. Whilst the words contemplation and meditation are sometimes used interchangeably, in this case we are using the word contemplation to mean prayer in which words have been replaced by love. This form of prayer requires us to quieten our thoughts down so that we are not trying to communicate verbally with God, but rather, we are trying simply to come into a place of wonder, in which we feel the love we have for God and the love he has for us. This is sometimes called *Centering Prayer* and takes some practice to really get the hang of it. This was the third and final part of the *Lectio Divina*.

In the seventh lesson we looked at the place of suffering and fasting in prayer and saw how God wants us to enter into the sufferings of others as we pray for them. The key verse here is Luke 9: 23 “Then [Jesus] said to them all: ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.’” We saw that just as Jesus’ death on the cross made him the wounded healer of the world, so we too can become wounded healers to those around us. But this requires humility, and we saw how fasting is a way of humbling ourselves before God as we put our own desires to one side in order to wait on him.

In the eighth lesson we looked at the place of faith in intercession. We noted that we do not need lots of faith in order to pray effectively - we just need faith the size of a mustard seed – but we do need SOME faith. We saw how it pleases God when we have faith, and how Jesus was both amazed at the faith of the Centurion in Matthew 8: 5-13 and in the lack of faith of the people of his hometown in Mark 6: 6. Finally, we looked at how children are good at having faith, and how Jesus calls us to follow their example.

In the ninth lesson we looked at the place of love in intercession. We saw that our capacity to love is central to our Christian faith, just as it is central to the nature of God. When God spoke the universe into existence he did so from a heart of love. So a part of our faith journey is to grow in our capacity to love, both God and our neighbour, and as we do so we will find the nature of our prayers will change and become more effective.

In the tenth lesson we looked at the place of grace in intercession. We saw how the whole of our relationship with God, including our prayer lives, is an unmerited gift from God. We then went on to see how, in the same way, we need to have relationships of grace with others, which means we pray blessings (or grace-prayers) on those we struggle to get on with. The key verse here is Matthew 5: 44, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” We saw that, as pray-ers, we need to be people who are prepared to pay the cost of grace on our lives as we follow Jesus in loving those who don’t deserve our love, and in being prepared to see them in a different way to that which comes more naturally to our sinful nature.

And now to return to the three prayer principles of this course...

[Back to the three Prayer Principles...](#)

In the first lesson I talked about the three prayer principles this course is based on. **Prayer Principle One** says “Our prayer lives will always be imperfect so we shouldn’t feel bad about it. We need to come to terms with it and just try to do our best.” Our prayer lives, like every other part of our lives, will never reach perfection in this life, so we shouldn’t beat ourselves up about it. But on the other hand, neither should we use that as an excuse for

not trying to continuously move forward in our friendship with God. It is us who sets the limitation on our relationship with God, not him!

Prayer Principle Two says, “We must pace ourselves like a long distance runner, not like a sprinter because:

- Our journey into prayer is as long as the life we live.
- It takes time to learn and see the progress we are making.”

Whether it's fasting little and often, or whether it's practising some of the prayer exercises we have done over the last ten weeks, the way to make progress is by growing slowly. In fact, life sets the pace for us. A child takes many years to grow up, and over the months and years a parent will observe the small changes that occur in their child as their abilities, knowledge and understanding change and develop. It is the same with our prayer lives. We grow slowly and should not get frustrated if does not happen quickly, nor should we try to speed up the process too much.

Prayer Principle Three says, “If we give God our **time** and **attention**, and approach him with **love** and **humility**, both we and our relationship with God will grow.” Recently I was reading the book by Teresa of Avila called *The Way of Perfection* when I came across this quote in which she identifies three things that are essential to a life of prayer. She writes, “I shall mention some things that are necessary for those who seek to follow the way of prayer; so necessary that even if these persons are not very contemplative, they can be far advanced in the service of the Lord if they possess these things....The first of these is love for one another; the second is detachment from all created things; the third is true humility, which, even though I speak of it last, is the main practice and embraces all the others.” I realized that we were both saying the same thing, albeit in a different context. She identifies love and humility as essential for a life of prayer, as I do, but when she is talking about detachment, she means a letting go of everything that is of this world in order to take hold of God. In my case detachment means taking some time out from the things of this world in order to give God our full attention. The context for her is that she is writing her book for nuns to read. I have produced my prayer course for people whose lives are set very much in the world. Either way, the goal is the same, a more intimate friendship with God through prayer. In the end that is what prayer is all about. It's not about striving. It's not about making lists of people and needs for us to determinedly pray for every day (or feel guilty when we don't). It's about building a friendship with God, through Jesus Christ, that will last for eternity.

In John 15: 14 - 15 Jesus says, “You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because servants do not know their master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.” So Jesus has radically redefined our relationship with God in this passage as he calls us, those who have become his disciples, his friends. He does so because of the nature of the communication now possible between him and us. There is a mutual sharing going on. It is a friendship of **love**, which is only available to the **humble**, because it is the humble who will trust Jesus and allow him to take the lead in the friendship (which is essential to the relationship), and this friendship grows as we give God our **time** and **attention**.

Becoming deep wells for healing and life...

We have come to the end of the course, but I want to share one more thought. When I came to the end of my first silent retreat I happened to read this section from Philip Yancey's book *Reaching for the Invisible God...* “My pastor in Chicago, Bill Leslie, said he

often felt like an old hand-operated water pump, the kind still found in some campgrounds. Everyone who came to him for help would pump vigorously a few times, and each time he felt something drain out of him. Ultimately he reached a place of spiritual emptiness, with nothing more to give. He felt dry, desiccated.

In the midst of this period, Bill went on a week-long retreat and bared his soul to his assigned spiritual director, a nun. He expected her to offer soothing words about what a sacrificial, unselfish person he was, or perhaps recommend a sabbatical. Instead she said, "Bill, there's only one thing to do if your reservoir runs dry. You've got to go deeper." He returned from that retreat convinced that his faith depended less on his outer journey of life and ministry than on his inner journey toward spiritual depth.

In the foothills of the Rocky Mountains where I live, well-diggers drilled down 640 feet before striking water for our house. Even then the water only trickled until they used a technique called "fracking," short for hydro-fracturing. Pumping water down the well shaft at very high pressure, technicians shattered the granite into gravel and opened seams for water flow. As I watched, pressures that to me seemed likely to destroy the well actually tapped new sources of water. I'm sure Bill Leslie would appreciate the analogy: extreme pressure, seemingly destructive, forced him to seek new sources of strength - the very reason he had pursued spiritual direction in the first place."

Let us see ourselves as a well, out of which flows God's living water to heal and refresh others. If we desire for that to happen more, then we need to make our well deeper by seeking greater intimacy with God and thereby becoming greater men and women of prayer.

The class ended with a time when each student prayed for the others in the class.