

Explorers in Prayer – Lesson Two Notes

The Place of Praise and Thanksgiving in Prayer

You are reminded about reducing the amount of noise in your daily life for the duration of the course, and to bring your thoughts to God regularly. The enemy strives to distract us through many other things.

You are also reminded that the aim of the course is to develop our relationship with God so that our praying comes out of that relationship and is not separate from it. Our relationship with God is a relationship based on love and this week's session is essentially about growing that sense of love for God in our prayer lives through understanding the place and importance of praise and thanksgiving in prayer.

1) We don't think of saying 'thank you'.

In Ephesians 5: 15-20 Paul reminds us always to thank God. "Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

It is very easy to forget to say 'thank you', especially when we have a lot to talk to God about, or urgent requests to bring to God in prayer. It is common for people who have children to find they have to teach their children to say 'thank you'. It is a part of their maturing process to realise that the world does not revolve around them, so that if someone does something to bless them, it is appropriate and important to acknowledge that act of kindness or generosity. But thanking someone, or showing your appreciation of them also has the very positive effect of deepening our relationship with them. As we reflect on their good character or kind deeds so we will grow in love and appreciation of them.

2) We do not appreciate the goodness of God.

As Christians, we now live in a relationship with a God of love whose desire is to bless us, and so it is appropriate to acknowledge the many blessings from God with praise and thankfulness. To do this is to pronounce a truth about God – that he is worthy of our praise and thanksgiving. We can find this hard enough to do when things are going well, but it is even more difficult when it seems to us that his blessings have started to run dry; when life is hard and everything seems to be going wrong.

3) We do not trust that God is always working for our good.

In Romans 12: 15 Paul writes, "Rejoice with those who rejoice. Mourn with those who mourn." Both of these reactions can be hard to do. If we are feeling miserable about our own lives it can be very hard to rejoice with those for whom things are going well. If we are rejoicing at our good fortune and hear about someone else's great loss, it can be just as hard to genuinely mourn with those who mourn. But Paul didn't write these words just to

give us another challenge in life! He is showing us a destination towards which we need to journey. (And it IS a journey. We never really arrive at our destination in this life, so don't be concerned if you haven't got there yet.) To grow in Godly maturity includes becoming more able to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn. It means coming to a place where we are increasingly able to let go of the need for our own happiness, and instead pursue the happiness of others. This is the world as God intended it, but to arrive at this destination we need to have clearly grasped what it means for God to have love at the centre of all he does. Just as it is hard to trust God if we haven't found out for ourselves that he is fully trustworthy, so we cannot praise God for his loveliness if we haven't found out for ourselves just how full of love he is!

We each need to discover for ourselves that God always knows best, and is continuously working for our good...Romans 8:28 "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him..." Many of us know this verse, but do we really know the truth of its message?

Acts 16 25-28 "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, 'Don't harm yourself! We are all here!'"

I don't suppose Paul and Silas wanted to be in jail. Many people would question if this was a good example of God being a God of love; that he should confine some of his most devoted followers to a filthy, damp, underground prison cell. But Paul and Silas knew that God is a God of love, and these temporary circumstances were not going to stop them praising God for all to hear!

Habakkuk has learnt this lesson as well, when he writes in chapter 3: 17-18 "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 Saviour."

4) We can feel angry with God and do not feel like thanking him. Perhaps this is because something bad has happened to us...

Many years ago I went through a period of some months when I was angry with God for the way he seemed to be intervening in my life. He wasn't acting as I wanted him to and it was getting me down! I spoke to a Christian friend about this who then asked me, "Have you thought of thanking God for his intervening as it is always for your good?" Annoyingly, I knew my friend was right. Later that night I sat in my room and considered how I should pray about the situation. I felt that it would have been strange to thank God for the difficult time I was going through, but I could thank God for his continuing love for me, and for the good he would bring out of this situation as I offered it to him. To my surprise, as I prayed this prayer of thankfulness, the feelings of anger that had been troubling me for some time simply evaporated in a moment!

...or because God has not given us something we desire.

As I watch my two year old son I see a human being chasing every kind of impulse desire. At that moment in time, for him, each desire is vitally important, and if I prevent him from

getting what he wants there can be loud cries and tears...until his desires are re-directed and something else has become important to him. As I watch this perfectly normal behaviour for his age, I wondered whether I, as an adult who is being watched over by my heavenly Father, behaved in similar ways? Do I complain rather than thank God for his withholding one strong desire and redirecting me towards something else? This is what Gerard W. Hughes writes in his book *God of Surprises* (pages 61-62).

“The problem is the multiplicity and variety of conflicting desires within us. How are we to discover what we really desire? Our surface desires are always the most noisy and demanding. When answered, they can leave us feeling empty and sad because in satisfying them we have frustrated deeper desires within us. In the book of Revelation (3:17), the writer tells the unfortunate Church of Laodicea, ‘You say to yourself, “I am rich, I have made a fortune, and have everything I want”, never realising that you are wretchedly and pitifully poor, and blind and naked too.’ This is a realisation that often hits men and women in what is called the ‘mid-life crises’ and can throw them into depression. In fact, this realisation can be the beginning of a new life.

If we are able to discover what we really want, if we could become conscious of the deepest desire within us, then we should have discovered God’s will. God’s will is not an impersonal blueprint for living forced on us by a capricious God and contrary to almost every inclination in us. God’s will is our freedom. He wants us to discover what we really want and who we really are. The struggle is not our will against God’s will, but our will struggling with its divided self, the will which wants all creation to praise, reverence and serve me against the will that wants to praise, reverence and serve God, the will which wants to take over from God against the will which wants to let God be God.”

Conclusion

So, on our spiritual journey we have to learn to trust in God’s heart of love, and far superior wisdom, and know that he will look after us as we walk closely with him through life, whatever it may bring. Through the hardest of circumstances we become able to rejoice in the God we know, because we discover that he is always working for our good. Then we can let go of the things that we want and start praying for what God wants. We become co-conspirators with God. Or as Richard Foster puts it on page two of his book, “He invites us into the workshop of his creativity, where we can be co-labourers with him, working together to determine the outcomes of events.” I prefer the term ‘co-conspirators’ as it has that sense of two people talking to each other. But either way, the burden for the outcome of whatever we are doing or experiencing in life becomes Gods and not ours, which is where it should be!

I want us to think about our calling for a moment. Our calling is not just the moment we sense God at work in our lives and respond by becoming a Christian. Our calling is the whole journey God has taken us on since becoming a Christian, and it will continue into the future...

Here is one example of Jesus’ calling to us...

Matthew 11: 28-30 “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

He talks about his yoke being easy and his burden light, but we may not have felt it like that. The heavy burden comes from us seeking our own will and pursuing our own desires

in the belief that these things are the best for us, and if we don't get the things we want we can feel very sorry for ourselves! The light burden that Jesus offers can only be gained when we understand that, actually, God knows better than we do, even about ourselves!

Home work

Individual Exercise:

Do one of these exercises each day during your fifteen minute quiet time.

Day 1 - Do a mental checklist of God's characteristics (see Galatians 5: 22-23) and thank him for who he is.

Day 2 - Do a mental checklist of what Jesus did in his life on earth and thank him for those things.

Day 3 - The Holy Spirit is the one who reveals God to us. Thank him for the things he has revealed to you.

Day 4 - Do a mental checklist of all the friends and family God has given you and thank him for them.

Day 5 - Do a reflection of your life and thank God for the times he has clearly intervened.

Day 6 - Do a reflection on your current circumstances and thank God for them.

Day 7 - Do a mental checklist of all your possessions and thank God for them.

Remember to give God the full 15 minutes even if you run out of things to thank God for. It is a good practise to still quietly and just wait on God.

Read chapters 7, 8 & 9 of the course book.

Prayer Triplet Exercise: Spend time in a collective thanksgiving and praise, avoiding the temptation to ask him for anything. At the end, discuss how you felt about doing this.