

Explorers in Prayer – Lesson Three Notes

The Place of Repentance and Godliness in Prayer

I was once talking to a friend of mine who had been going through a hard time. She raised the issue of unanswered prayer. She was wondering, since Jesus specifically said in places like Luke 11:9 “Ask and it will be given you”, or talks about persistence in prayer producing results (The parable of the persistent widow in Luke 18.), why wasn't she (my friend) getting the answers to her prayers that she was looking for?

I want to suggest that part of the answer to this question lies in the link the bible makes between the effectiveness of our prayer lives and our own personal godliness (god-likeness).

Here are a few bible passages that make this point:

Psalms 84: 11. “No good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless.”

Hebrews 5: 7 “During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.”

James 5: 16 -18 “The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.”

Psalms 66: 18-19 “If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened; but God has surely listened and has heard my prayer.”

1 John 3:21-22 “Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him.”

Proverbs 15: 29 “The Lord is far from the wicked but he hears the prayer of the righteous.”

1 Peter 3: 12 “For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.” This is a quote from Psalm 34: 15.

In Luke 1 Zechariah and Elizabeth are described as “upright in the sight of God” and the angel comes to tell them “your prayer has been heard”. The child they had prayed for over so many years was now on the way.

In Luke 2 we are told of Simeon who the bible calls a “righteous and devout” person. His prayer, the desire of his heart, was that he would see the Messiah and his prayer was answered.

In John 9 the man born blind tells the Pharisees, “We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will.”

This is what some other writers on prayer have to say:

Referencing John 15: 7, “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” Norman Grubb writes, “This key text, John 15: 7, makes it plain that the promise is unlimited, but its fulfilment depends on [us remaining in Christ]...The scriptural key to [this] abiding is in 1 John 2 vs 6 ‘Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.’ In other words, it meant being willing for the Holy Spirit to live through [us] the life the Saviour would have lived, if He had been in [our] place.” From the book *Rees Howells: Intercessor*

“Our power in prayer depends upon our life. Where our life is right we shall know how to pray so as to please God, and prayer will secure the answer...All lack of power to pray aright and perseveringly, all lack of power in prayer with God, points to some lack in the Christian life. It is as we learn to live the life that pleases God, that God will give what we ask.” Andrew Murray, from his book *The Ministry of Intercession*,

“The apostle John summed up the relation between prayer and behaviour: ‘[We] receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him.’ Martin Lloyd-Jones answered the question of why people like George Mueller and Martin Luther received such spectacular answers to their prayers by saying, ‘We desire to receive all the blessings which saints have received; but we forget that they were saints. We ask, why does God not answer my prayer as He answered that man’s prayer? We should ask why is it that I have not lived the type of life which that man has lived?’” Philip Yancey, from his book *Prayer – Does it make any difference?*

So what is Godliness?

Godliness is not about our external actions. This was the message Jesus had problems communicating to the so called ‘godly’ of his day. He said to them, “*Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean.*” (Matthew 23:27). He went on to explain, “What comes out of you is what defiles you. For from within, out of your hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile you.” (Mark 7: 20-23) On another occasion Jesus says, “I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Matthew 5:28).

Question: Do you know someone whom you would describe as godly? What is it about them that makes you think of them in that way?

Humility as a trait of godliness – see the link between these next two stories.

Daniel 10: 4-12 “On the twenty-fourth day of the first month, as I was standing on the bank of the great river, the Tigris, I looked up and there before me was a man dressed in linen, with a belt of fine gold from Uphaz around his waist. His body was like topaz, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and his voice like the sound of a multitude. I, Daniel, was the only one who saw the vision; those who were with me did not see it, but such terror overwhelmed them that they fled and hid themselves. So I was left alone, gazing at this great vision; I had no strength left, my face turned deathly pale and I was helpless. Then I heard him speaking, and as I listened to him, I fell into a deep sleep, my face to the ground. A hand touched

me and set me trembling on my hands and knees. He said , 'Daniel, you who are highly esteemed, consider carefully the words I am about to speak to you, and stand up, for I have now been sent to you.' And when he said this to me, I stood up trembling. Then he continued, 'Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them.'"

Luke 18: 9-14 - The parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

"To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed "God, I thank you that I am not like other people - robbers, evildoers, adulterers - or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get." But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.'" * see note below

Numbers 12: 1-8, "Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite. 'Has the LORD spoken only through Moses?' they asked. 'Hasn't he also spoken through us?' And the LORD heard this. (Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.) At once the LORD said to Moses, Aaron and Miriam, 'Come out to the tent of meeting, all three of you.' So the three of them went out. Then the LORD came down in a pillar of cloud; he stood at the entrance to the tent and summoned Aaron and Miriam. When the two of them stepped forward, he said, 'Listen to my words: when there are prophets of the LORD among you, I reveal myself to them in visions, I speak to them in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?'"

Question: Do you know someone you would describe as humble? What is it about them that makes them humble?

Living close to the truth...

In Richard Fosters book, page 63, he says "humility means to live as close to the truth as possible." So the purpose of repentance is to enable us to live this way - it is the way in which we recognise and acknowledge the truth. In repentance, we step out of the dark place we have hidden ourselves and into the light where the truth is seen. That can be a difficult thing to do, but it is NOT about having a low opinion of ourselves. Such a low opinion would also be a lie. The truth is we are both wonderful and flawed at the same time, and true humility acknowledges both those characteristics about ourselves.

Daniel was a man who lived close to the truth. We find that not only because we are told he is a humble man (see passage above), but we find it also in the story of him in the lion's den (Daniel 6). The satraps wanted to destroy Daniel and so they examined his life to find charges they could bring against him. They found nothing wrong with him so they tried something else - they came up with a lie. They decided to treat King Darius as if he were a god by declaring a month in which all prayers should be directed towards him. Daniel knew this claim about the King was a lie and ignored it. Living close to the truth, he

would only pray to the One who was truly God. He was thrown into the lion's den, but in the end the One who is and was the truth set him free.

John 14: 6

"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Jesus, as the Son of God, was not only a person who lived close to the truth...he WAS and IS the truth! So to approach the Father we also need to be people who live close to the truth. Like Daniel, people tried to find charges that they could use to destroy Jesus. They failed to do so, and so they too had to resort to lies. Their lies led to Jesus being nailed him to a cross and laid him in the ground. But again, like Daniel, their lies could not prevent Jesus from being set free by the Truth and raised to life again.

Jesus said in John 8: **"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."**

In John 8: 44 Jesus calls Satan **"the father of lies."** We see in the garden of Eden (Genesis 2 & 3) that Adam and Eve are presented with the truth from God, and a lie from Satan regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They choose Satan's lie, and humanity has been choosing Satan's lies ever since.

In a court case two things happen in order to begin the healing process made necessary by a crime. The first is that everything concerning that crime is brought out into the open for all to see. What is hidden in the darkness is brought out into the light. The second is that the person who committed the crime is punished. In our case, we bring our sins out into the open as we confess our sins, and then Jesus takes the punishment for those sins so that **"by his wounds we are healed"**. (Isaiah 53: 5)

Question: what can you do to live your life closer to the truth about who God has made you to be, and the circumstances he has put you in?

Home work

Individual Exercise: Take a look at one of the following each day and ask God to help us as we examine our hearts so that we might know and confess the truth about ourselves concerning these things.

Day 1 - How much do we desire to know and love God?

Day 2 - Do we have a heart of compassion for the poor and needy?

Day 3 - Are we willing to be obedient to God?

Day 4 - Are we willing to be humble?

Day 5 - How easy/hard do we find it to forgive others? *

Day 6 - Do we have a child like faith in God?

Day 7 - How much are we driven by our own desires?

* Note: The Lord's Prayer reminds us of the strong link between God forgiving us and us forgiving others - so be particularly aware of our need to confess any unforgiveness.

Read chapters 2 & 3 of the course book.

Prayer Triplet Exercise: The prayer time for this session may not last a half hour. The meeting should open with a time of prayer; inviting God's presence and gentle working in our hearts and minds as we discuss the following. If you feel able to, talk about your

childhood and the things that might link up your childhood with the person you are now. Also, we had a definition of humility from Richard Foster's book as living "as close to the truth as possible". Discuss what you think living close to the truth means for you. End the session praying for strength to live close to the truth, and healing for those times when sin has triumphed over us.

Here is an encouraging story to inspire us all about prayer:

George Mueller – Man of God

Charles Inglis, the well-known evangelist, relates the following remarkable incident:

"When I first came to America thirty-one years ago, I crossed the Atlantic with the captain of a steamer who was one of the most devoted men I ever knew; and when we were off the banks of Newfoundland he said to me: 'Mr. Inglis, the last time I crossed here, five weeks ago, one of the most extraordinary things happened that has completely revolutionized the whole of my Christian life. Up to that time I was one of your ordinary Christians. We had a man of God on board, George Mueller, of Bristol. I had been on that bridge for twenty-two hours and never left it. I was startled by someone tapping me on the shoulder. It was George Mueller.

'Captain,' said he, 'I have come to tell you that I must be in Quebec on Saturday afternoon.' This was Wednesday.

'It is impossible,' I said.

'Very well, if your ship can't take me God will find some other means of locomotion to take me. I have never broken an engagement in fifty-seven years.'

'I would willingly help you, but how can I? I am helpless.'

'Let us go down to the chart room and pray,' he said.

I looked at this man and I thought to myself, 'What lunatic asylum could the man have come from? I never heard of such a thing.'

'Mr. Mueller,' I said, 'do you know how dense this fog is?'

'No,' he replied, 'my eye is not on the density of the fog, but on the living God, who controls every circumstance of my life.'

He went down on his knees, and he prayed one of the most simple prayers. I thought to myself, 'That would suit a children's class, where the children were not more than eight or nine years of age.' The burden of his prayer was something like this: 'O Lord, if it is consistent with Thy will, please remove this fog in five minutes. You know the engagement You made for me in Quebec for Saturday. I believe it is Your will.' When he had finished, I was going to pray, but he put his hand on my shoulder and told me not to pray.

'First,' he said, 'you do not believe God will do it; and, second, I believe He has done it. And there is no need whatever for you to pray about it.'

I looked at him, and George Mueller said this: 'Captain, I have known my Lord for fifty-seven years and there has never been a single day that I have failed to gain an audience with the King. Get up, Captain and open the door, and you will find the fog is gone.' I got up, and the fog was gone. On Saturday afternoon George Mueller was in Quebec."