

Explorers in Prayer – Lesson Plan Seven

The Place of Suffering and Fasting in Prayer

The aims of this class are as follows:

- 1) To open up the idea of a link between praying and doing.
- 2) To do an exercise in praying with those who are suffering.
- 3) To explain the reasons for, and the practicalities of fasting.
- 4) To offer a practical exercise in fasting to do at home.

Supplementary items to take to class:

- 1) Candles/matches.
- 2) Box of tissues.

Arrive - light a candle and wait in silence - opening prayer

Feedback from the previous weeks readings and exercise

Feedback from book:

- Chapter 14 - Contemplative Prayer
- Chapter 12 - The Prayer of the Heart

Feedback on the prayer exercises:

Growing our love for God through contemplative prayer.

Discuss possible answers to the question: **What does spiritual maturity look like?** One possible answer is below.

Philippians 4: 12-13 “I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.”

In his book *The Greatest Prayer*, John Dominic Crossan quotes Jesus in Matthew 5:48 “**Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**” And points out that the Greek word used for ‘perfect’ (*teleios*) is translated in other Bible passages as ‘mature’ (Phil. 3:15; Col. 1:28; 4:12; Eph. 4:13).

Note for the course leader

After getting feedback on the previous weeks readings I then ask people to give me their own answer to the question “What does spiritual maturity look like?” We don’t comment or discuss people’s answers. When they have each given me their own answer I give them mine. This exercise is just to give them something to think about.

End of Feedback

Main Talk Part One - Suffering

When a relationship is formed between two people (friendship, marriage, adult-child, etc.), it is formed by love. Inevitably, with love comes some level of commitment between the two people. With a lot of these relationships, particularly marriage and adult-child, but also

friendships, there will come a time when the relationship is strained; when the relationship causes pain or suffering. Hopefully, the two people will be able to work through those trials and grow through the process, because pain and suffering plays an important part in the maturing process. It seems to be the way God has made the world that we need trials and difficulties, etc, in order to grow into maturity as spiritual human beings. Last week we looked at praying with the heart, which is appropriate because our relationship with God is meant to be one of love. So this week we are looking at what follows on from that - praying through the trials and suffering that will come through our relationship with God.

"In order to be saints, you have to seriously want to be one. Saint Thomas Aquinas assures us that holiness 'is nothing else but a resolution made, the heroic act of a soul that surrenders to God.' And he adds: 'Spontaneously we love God, we run towards him, we get close to him, we possess him.' Our willingness is important because it changes us into the image of God and likens us to him! The decision to be holy is a very dear one. Renunciation, temptations, struggles, persecutions, and all kinds of sacrifices are what surround the soul that has opted for holiness." Mother Teresa of Calcutta - *In My Own Words*

Carrying our cross in prayer...

Luke 9: 23-24 "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. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.'"

Our motivation for suffering or sacrifice in prayer should be our heart of love. God is the source of all love and we can come to him to ask that he increases our capacity to love. In 1 Corinthians 13: 3 Paul writes, "If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but do not have love, I gain nothing."

In the biography of Rees Howells, *Intercessor*, the author tells the story of a mother with consumption who came to Howells asking him to pray for her healing..."Mr. Howells had not gone very far on this path before the conviction took definite hold of him that, before he was through, the Lord would literally let this disease come upon him, and that only as an actual consumptive would he fully be able to intercede for consumptives....He faced up to what this would mean, and found grace to be willing for it, if thereby the Lord could restore this mother to her family of children."

Isaiah 53: 5 "But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed."

Henri Nouwen - wrote a book called *The Wounded Healer* in which he talks about how our wounds can bring healing to others just as Christ's wounds on the cross has brought healing to the world. Through our wounds, we not only stand with the suffering and support them in that way, but something spiritual happens as well. Our actions seem to reinforce our prayers. I am not talking about being martyrs. We do not seek the wounds. But we are prepared to endure hardship if this is what is required for good to be released in another person's life. Jesus didn't want to go to the cross, but neither did he shrink from it when it came.

Offering up our hardships leads to hope...

What does it mean to 'offer up' hardships and difficulties to God? Is it simply being able to

'grin and bear it'? Does 'offering up' mean that I muster all my willpower to deny or hold back negative feelings of hurt, anger, irritation? No, 'offering up' is not simply a matter of being able to 'grin and bear it', nor is it a cold detachment from the hardships of daily life.

'Offering up' is not a 'no', or a denial of life's struggles but a 'yes', a positive affirmation of God's loving presence and guiding hand even in the midst of them. By our 'offering up' we are spiritually united with the Father, through His Son in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The act of 'offering up' then is a 'letting go' of all the minor and major irritations of ordinary life; those particular things, actions or persons that trouble us, drag us down, discourage or upset us. In making an offering to God, each day and from moment to moment, we learn to entrust our lives in hope to the love and abiding presence of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

James 1: 12 "Blessed are those who persevere under trial, because when they have stood the test, they will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him."

End of Main Talk Part One

Exercise 1

We are going to spend 10 minutes in silence offering up to God our pain, our hardships, those things that cause us to struggle. At the end of 10 minutes I shall say a prayer for the person on my left which will be to consign those hardships into the hands of God and to pray God's blessing on that person. I will then hand the prayer to that person and they will pray it for the person on their left.

The prayer goes like this:

Heavenly Father, we offer up ...(name)... to you in our prayers and place in your hands all his/her hurts, hardships, worries and sufferings. Help him/her to see each day the hope and joy that lies beyond all these trials, and thank you for your love which reaches down to us in our time of need to help us through. Take all these trials, heavenly Father, and use them to grow the fruit of your Holy Spirit in his/her life. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

End of Exercise 1

Main Talk Part Two – Fasting

The problem with fasting...

Begin by sharing what has been people's experience of fasting?

Saint Jerome wrote "When the stomach is full, it is easy to talk of fasting."

I have found the above statement to be VERY true. There are many times when I have thought what a great thing it would be to be able to fast whenever I chose to do so. But when the moment comes to stop eating, when it would normally be a mealtime and I am hungry, then I know how hard fasting really is.

It's about humbling ourselves...

Firstly, whilst fasting is prescribed to the nation of Israel on particular days in the Old Testament, there is no rule in the New Testament that says we have to fast. However, it was a common practice for New Testament Bible characters to fast including Jesus, John the Baptist and Paul. Whilst Jesus has little to teach about it, he does seem to assume his followers will practice fasting after he has ascended to the Father. In Matthew 6: 16-18 he begins some teaching with the words “**When you fast...**” And in Matthew 9: 14-15, when asked why his disciples didn't fast Jesus answered, “**How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.**”

Secondly, fasting is not a means of getting what we want from God. In his book *Fasting – A Neglected Discipline*, David Rushworth-Smith writes, “**If we use fasting in order to obtain some benefit, as though it were a tool in our hands, we may find ourselves in spiritual extremism or suffering frustration. If we fast for the right reasons, we shall notice that we have gained some benefits unawares.**”

The first reason for fasting is because it helps us answer our general calling from God to humble ourselves. In 1 Kings 21: 27 - 29 we read that King Ahab wanted a vineyard which belonged to a man called Naboth, but Naboth wouldn't sell it to him. So Ahab's wife, Jezebel, plots the murder of Naboth. When this happens God sends Elijah to Ahab to proclaim God's judgement on him and his family.... “**When Ahab heard these words, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted. He lay in sackcloth and went around meekly. Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite: ‘Have you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself, I will not bring this disaster in his day, but I will bring it on his house in the days of his son.’**”

In the above passage fasting is the way Ahab uses to humble himself before God. Some people have asked if what Ahab was doing was actually repentance. As we have discussed in previous classes, humility and repentance are two sides of the same coin. To repent is to acknowledge the truth about yourself, and to be humble is to live your life close to the truth. Therefore, to humble yourself is to do something which brings you back to the truth. This is the predominant purpose for fasting in the Old Testament. It is like waiting on God. As we fast we are waiting on God for when we can eat. It is acknowledging that he is in charge; that he is Lord. Fasting has no power in itself! This humbling of ourselves fits in with **Prayer Principle Three** - if we give God our **time** and **attention**, and approach him with **love** and **humility**, both we and our relationship with God will grow.

Humbling as a prelude to doing...

But this humbling of ourselves is not meant to stop there. Rather, it is a prelude to entering into the struggles of this world.

Isaiah 58: 1-7 “**Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins. For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. ‘Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?’ “Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in**

quarrelling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter - when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?"

In Luke 4 we get the story of Jesus humbling himself before his Father with a forty day fast in the wilderness, and straight afterwards he goes to the synagogue at Nazareth and reads from Isaiah 61 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom to the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

To pray is to become engaged in the struggle between good and evil, between light and darkness, between God and the devil, and we cannot separate our engagement in prayer from our engagement through actions...

Saint Telemachus...was a monk in 404 AD who felt God was calling him to go to Rome, but didn't know why. When he got there he found crowds of excited people heading off to the coliseum. He joined them and entered to see what was going to happen. Gladiators came out proclaiming "Hail Caesar! We die to the glory of Caesar." Telemachus was appalled that four centuries after Christ people were still killing each other to entertain the crowds, so he jumped into the arena and called out, "In the name of Christ, stop!" It is unclear if he was killed by the gladiators or stoned to death by the angry crowd, but he died on the floor of the arena. This was seen by the Emperor Honorius, who was so moved by it that he issued an edict a few days later banning the games.

Doing fasting...

In Judaism it has been a common practise to fast two days a week – Monday and Thursday. The early Christian church decided to do the same practise, except on Wednesday and Friday. John Wesley thought so highly of fasting that he tried to revive this practice and refused to ordain anyone into the Methodist ministry who did not fast on those two days. Today in the western church the practice has been neglected. I personally have found fasting to be very difficult. I have managed it on a few occasions and have not enjoyed the experience, nor did I seem to gain anything from it. My approach is different now. I have learnt that if I fast, it should be little and often rather than one off extended fasts. **Prayer Principle Two** applies here - we build up our ability to fast slowly. We do not launch ourselves into long periods of fasting when we have no experience of it before. The spiritual benefits of fasting will only reveal themselves over a long period of time, so it is important that we fast as we can, and not in a way that we cannot maintain.

I quote again from David Rushworth-Smith's book *Fasting – A Neglected Discipline*, in which he writes, "the value of this discipline lies not in its immediate effect, but in the results which flow from its practice, and in the gradual effect which it has on the individual believer."

An important reminder...

If we are going to fast, it is important that we do not do so in order to gain anyone's attention other than God. For practical reasons we may need to discuss a fast with someone else, but other than that, Jesus tells us to give no indication to others that we are fasting. Matthew 6: 16-18 "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

End of Main Talk Part Two

Exercise 2

In this exercise we are going to sit for 10 minutes with those who are suffering. To do this we simply choose someone that we want to sit with who we know are suffering. It may be a friend or relative. It may be someone we have heard about on the news who is suffering. It doesn't matter if we have met them or know much about them. (When I do this exercise I tend to sit with a man I have only heard about through the news who is in permanent solitary confinement in prison.) Unbeknown to them we are going to give them a gift of ten minutes of our time to imagine ourselves sat with them in their suffering. Sometimes, when we hear of a tragedy in the news, a spokesman may say something like "our prayers are with the grieving family" and I'm left wondering if people really are praying for the people concerned. In this exercise we are going to do just that. As we sit in silence and imagine ourselves with the person who is suffering, we should allow ourselves to feel something of the pain that person must be feeling and gently lift them to the Lord.

When the ten minutes is over the course leader should ask each person how they got on with the exercise.

End of Exercise 2

So to summarise this week's lesson:

- 1) Pain and suffering plays its part in the maturing process. It seems to be the way God has made the world; that we need trials and difficulties, etc, in order to grow into maturity as spiritual human beings.
- 2) Whilst Jesus has little to say about fasting, he does seem to assume his followers will practice fasting once he has ascended to the Father. Fasting is not a means of getting what we want from God. Rather, it helps us answer our general calling from God to humble ourselves, which fits in with **Prayer Principle Three** - if we give God our **time** and **attention**, and approach him with **love** and **humility**, both we and our relationship with God will grow.
- 3) The humbling of ourselves is not meant to be an end in itself. Rather, it is a prelude to entering into the struggles of this world. Through prayer, or humbling ourselves through fasting, we become engaged in the struggle between good and evil, between light and

darkness, between God and the devil, and we cannot separate this engagement through prayer from our engagement through actions.

4) **Prayer Principle Two** also applies with fasting - we develop our ability to fast slowly. We do not launch ourselves into long periods of fasting when we have no experience of it before. The spiritual benefits of fasting will only reveal themselves over a long period of time, so it is important that we fast as we can, and not in a way that we cannot maintain.

End of Summary

Homework

Distribute the handouts.

Note for the course leader

If you as the course leader are able, you should join with the students in the fast.

This week we are going to do a fast together. Very few people find fasting easy and so it is important that each individual student decides whether to fast and how to fast, but I have a suggested way to fast below. To provide spiritual support to one another I suggest that each student commits themselves to pray for at least one other member of the class who is fasting. Clearly not everyone should be fasting. Some for medical reasons. Some because they are pregnant. Some who have had eating disorders in the past should think of fasting in some other way rather than with food. Some people's metabolism means they are required to eat more regularly than others. If anyone is concerned about whether they should fast they should seek advice from their doctor.

Individual Exercise: The homework this week is going to be an exercise in prayer and fasting. If you are happy to do so, you should do a fast of your own choosing for the week, but which doesn't include Sunday. One example might be to skip a meal each day in rotation, e.g. day 1 - breakfast, day 2 - lunch, day 3 - supper, etc. This week's 15 minute daily exercise should be used to reflect on the link between our fasting and how God might be calling us to reach out to the poor and needy. Is there something God is wanting you to do for someone in need?

If you are not fasting, spend the 15 minutes each day sitting with someone in your imagination who is suffering. Try to feel what they might be going through and lift them up to God in prayer.

Read chapters 19 & 4 of the course book.

Prayer Triplet Exercise: Your triplet should be supporting each other during this week of fasting. For your triplet exercise, use your imagination to sit with Jesus in the desert as he fasted. He would have probably sat in a cool cave, with the heat of the desert sun evident at the entrance to the cave. Imagine the other members of your triplet are also sat there with you. Watch Jesus, silent and motionless as the time goes by, and let what you see speak to your heart. Jesus is about to begin his own ministry.

“The list of biblical personages who fasted becomes a ‘Who’s Who’ of Scripture: Moses the lawgiver, David the king, Elijah the prophet, Esther the queen, Daniel the seer, Anna the prophetess, Paul the apostle, Jesus Christ the incarnate Son. Many of the great Christians throughout church history fasted and witnessed to its value; among them were Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, David Brainerd, Charles Finney and Pastor Hsi of China.”

“In Scripture the normal means of fasting involved abstaining from all food, solid or liquid, but not from water.”

“It is well to know the process your body goes through in the course of a longer fast. The first three days are usually the most difficult in terms of physical discomfort and hunger pains. The body is beginning to rid itself of the toxic poisons that have built up over years of poor eating habits, and it is not a comfortable process. This is the reason for the coating on the tongue and bad breath. Do not be disturbed by these symptoms; rather be grateful for the increased health and well-being that will result. You may experience headaches during this time, especially if you are an avid coffee or tea drinker. Those are mild withdrawal symptoms which will pass, though they may be very unpleasant for a time.

By the fourth day the hunger pains are beginning to subside though you will have feelings of weakness and occasional dizziness. The dizziness is only temporary and caused by sudden changes in position. Move more slowly and you will have no difficulty. The weakness can come to the point where the simplest task takes great effort. Rest is the best remedy. Many find this the most difficult period of the fast.

By the sixth or seventh day you will begin to feel stronger and more alert. Hunger pains will continue to diminish until by the ninth or tenth day they are only a minor irritation. The body will have eliminated the bulk of toxic poisons and you will feel good. Your sense of concentration will be sharpened and you will feel as if you could continue fasting indefinitely. Physically this is the most enjoyable part of the fast.

Anywhere from twenty-one to forty days or longer, depending upon the individual, hunger pains will return. This is the first stage of starvation and signals that the body has used up all its excess reserves and is beginning to draw on the living tissue. The fast should be broken at this time.”

And finally...

The class will end with a time of open prayer. It might be good for the class to stand and hold hands in a closing prayer as a sign of unity.

After Class Notes:

Note for the course leader

Richard Foster's book *Celebration of Discipline* has a chapter on fasting which is well worth reading, particularly if you are considering doing a longer fast, for which he gives good practical advice. Here are some useful quotes from that chapter which I have put on the back of the class handout. I don't suggest you read them out loud in class unless you have a lot of time to spare.