

Explorers in Prayer – Lesson Plan Eight

The Place of Intercession in Prayer - Praying in Faith

The aims of this class are as follows:

- 1) To demonstrate the requirement of some faith in effective prayer.
- 2) To show that no amount of faith will guarantee our prayer is answered as we wish.
- 3) To do an exercise in listening to God and praying bold prayers.
- 4) To offer a practical exercise in listening and praying 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 4 - The Prayer of Tears
- Chapter 19 - The Prayer of Suffering

Feedback on the prayer exercises:

How did the fast go?

In your 15 minute reflections, did God put the needs of someone else on your heart? Or did you sit with someone, in your imagination, who you know is suffering?

End of Feedback

Main Talk (Faith)

We all have faith in something...

Hebrews 11: 1 “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”

Here are two things we can say about faith: 1) everyone has faith in something; and 2) we choose what we have faith in (though we may not have consciously made that choice). A person would be very troubled if they had no faith or sense of certainty about anything!

Some things we choose to have faith in prove reliable, and some choices prove to be misguided.

Questions: What things do you place your faith in? What examples of reliable or misguided faith can you think of in life, society, or history?

Some people choose to put their faith only in those things that they can judge using their five senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch). Since they cannot make a judgement about God by using these senses, they put no faith in him. Obviously, Christians are people who have chosen to have faith in the unseen God. But how much faith do we have in him, and what do we have faith that he will do? Some people pray for people who are sick, having faith that God will heal them, and then the sick person dies. Some people pray for safety in their travels and then end up being injured in a car accident. Some people pray for a marriage partner, believing that God will provide them with someone, only to remain single. I could go on...!

Faith pleases God and moves him to action...

The first thing to say is that it matters to God that we choose to put our faith in him. One of the themes of the Old Testament is how, time and again, the Israelites chose to put their faith in anything other than God, even when disaster was looming. In 2 Samuel 24 we find the story of David demanding a census of those men in Israel who were available for calling up to fight in a war. Instead of having faith in God to look after the nation David was putting his faith in his military might. God responded by sending the prophet Gad to pronounce judgement on David for his lack of faith. Faith pleases God and stirs him to action...

Matthew 8: 5-13 'When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. "Lord," he said, "my servant lies at home paralyzed, suffering terribly." Jesus said to him, "Shall I come and heal him?" The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, "Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would." And his servant was healed at that very hour.'

I love the fact that we humans are capable of amazing the Son of God. Unfortunately, we are able to amaze him by our lack of faith as well. Mark 6: 5-6 "[Jesus] could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. He was amazed at their lack of faith."

We do not need a lot of faith...

The second thing we can say is that, whilst more faith is better than less faith, in fact only a small amount of faith is all that is needed for our prayers to be heard and responded to. Jesus says in Matthew 17: 20 "I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." Mustard seeds are very small!

So what does Jesus mean when he says that we can move mountains if we have faith? In John 14: 12-14 Jesus says, “I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.”

The above statement “You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it”, should be seen in the context of the previous line that says, “anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing.” It means that we can ask, and have a sense of certainty that God will give us all that we need in order to live the life and do the work that He is calling us to do. It is NOT a carte blanche statement that God will give us whatever we ask for in any situation. Neither having a small amount of faith nor a lot of faith will guarantee that every prayer will be answered as we would like them to be.

When I was a teenager I had a friend called Tony who was six years older than me. Before I knew Tony he had already suffered from Leukaemia as a teenager, but it had gone in to remission. So when I first met him he was fit and healthy, and had a testimony to tell about how God had healed him. Tony met a young woman and began a relationship which led to them getting married. However, three months after their wedding the Leukaemia returned. Some people told Tony that if he only had enough faith he would be healed and, understandably, Tony went along with this. He wasn't ready to go to be with the Lord when he had just begun his married life with the woman he loved! Tony didn't lack faith, but neither was he healed.

When the evangelist David Watson got cancer of the colon he wrote the book “Fear no Evil” which chronicled the progression of his illness till shortly before he died. For most of his illness he thought God would heal him if he prayed with faith, but nearer his death he came to realise that God wouldn't. In the forward to David Watson's book, J.I. Packer wrote “Health and life, I would say, in the full and final sense of those words, are not what we die out of, but what we die into.” Or in other words, when we die we move from un-health to health, not the other way around.

Having a child-like faith...

Jesus saw children as being those humans who knew best how to live by faith. A child's need to rely on those who look after them from the moment they are born means that having faith in others comes naturally to them. They don't worry about where their next meal is coming from, or who will look after them if they are in danger or sick. But as a child grows up the hard knocks of life begin to weaken their ability to believe, and gradually they learn to trust less and question everything.

Jesus calls us to make a choice, to choose to have faith in God as our loving Father, in the way that children with good parents have faith in them. In Luke 18: 16 Jesus says, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”

Question: What parallels can we draw from the relationship between a child and their parents, and the relationship between us and God?

Possible answers to this question might include:

- i) Good parents, like God, give their children permission to fail, so that by trying and failing they may learn and grow.
- ii) We may approach God with boldness and confidence just as we can with good parents.
- iii) Good parents, like God, will not always give us what we ask for.

End of Main Talk

Exercise

So how can we be people who pray faith filled prayers when often our prayers seem to go unanswered? Having this kind of faith is ultimately a gift of the Holy Spirit, but we can ask for this and then try to be sensitive to what the Spirit is telling us to pray for. That is what this exercise is intended to help us do.

The group is divided into smaller groups of two:

Person 1 speaks for a short while about what's going on in their life right now; perhaps sharing several needs.

Person 2 just listens and only asks questions to clarify what person 1 is saying. Otherwise, person 2 does not comment on what person 1 has said.

Person 2 takes time out to mull over what has been said and prayerfully consider what they should pray for. They might even leave person 1 in order to be alone with God. When they think they know what to pray for, they return to person 1, tell them what they think they should pray for, and ask them if they agree with this.

If person 1 agrees, then person 2 will lay hands on person 1 and pray their prayer for them with boldness as there is agreement between the two people (Matthew 18:19 "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven."). Then the two swap round and do the same for the other person.

A word of warning...When I have done this exercise I have found that some people jump in with their conclusion as to what to pray for as soon as the other person has finished speaking. This should be discouraged! The purpose of this exercise is to wait on God, to try and discern what HE wants you to pray for, which might not be what seemed obvious at first.

Note for the course leader

You should explain the following exercise and then organize people into twos. You may find that some of your students have not laid hands on anyone to pray for them before, and you might need to discuss beforehand what the students are comfortable with doing. Before they go and do the exercise you should pray for the Holy Spirit to do his work. The students will then disperse in their twos and do as follows...

The following section is on the handout, but feel free to read this portion of Philip Yancey's book *Reaching for the Invisible God* Pages 214-216 if time permits.

'A newborn baby has all the body parts it will ever need, yet it must grow up in order to use them as intended. The same principle applies spiritually in the life of faith. "I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly – mere infants in Christ," Paul scolded the Corinthians. "I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it." Like many young believers, the Corinthians balked at moving past childhood immaturity to a more advanced stage.

On the other hand, Jesus plainly stated that, "unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Somehow we must learn to distinguish between appropriate *childlike* behaviour, a prerequisite for the kingdom of heaven, and inappropriate *childish* behaviour, a mark of stunted growth.

Psalm 131, one of the shortest psalms, hints at the difference between childish and childlike trust in God:

I do not concern myself with great matters
or things too wonderful for me.
But I have stilled and quieted my soul;
like a weaned child with its mother,
like a weaned child is my soul within me.

Arthur Weiser comments that the Christian is, "not like an infant crying loudly for his mother's breast, but like a weaned child that quietly rests by his mother's side, happy in being with her....And just as the child gradually breaks off the habit of regarding his mother only as a means of satisfying his own desire and learns to love her for her own sake, so the worshipper after a struggle has reached an attitude of mind in which he desires God for himself and not as a means of fulfillment of his own wishes. His life's centre of gravity has shifted."

Sometimes I find myself yearning for the glorious self-indulgence of infancy, when the world revolved around me, when a whimper or cry brought attention, when others met my needs with no effort on my part. Sometimes I look back, too, on an early stage in my spiritual pilgrimage when God seemed close and faith seemed easy and irrefutable – a stage before testing and disappointment, a stage before weaning. And then at church or in the supermarket I come across a baby, helpless, immobile, with little comprehension, and I realise anew the wisdom of creation that presses us on toward maturity, our growth fuelled by a diet of solid food, not milk.

While I still bear the scars of growing pains, I am learning to identify and avoid some seductions of childish faith: unrealistic expectations, legalism, and unhealthy dependence. Several times I have alluded to the danger of unrealistic expectations. A child must, at some point, learn to accept the world as it is rather than as he or she wants it to be. "It's not fair!" the foot-stamping lament of a child, mellows into "Life's not fair," the wisdom of adulthood. People vary in beauty, family background, athletic skill, intelligence, health, and wealth, and anyone who expects perfect fairness in this world will end up bitterly disappointed. Likewise, a Christian who expects God to solve all family problems, heal all diseases, and thwart baldness, greying, wrinkling, osteoporosis, senility, and other effects of ageing is pursuing childish magic, not mature religion.

J. I. Packer explains that, “God...is very gentle with very young Christians, just as mothers are with very young babies. Often the start of their Christian career is marked by great emotional joy, striking providences, remarkable answers to prayer, and immediate fruitfulness in their first acts of witness; thus God encourages them, and establishes them in “the life.” But as they grow stronger, and are able to bear more, He exercises them in a tougher school. He exposes them to as much testing by the pressure of opposed and discouraging influences as they are able to bear –not more, but equally not less. Thus he builds our character, strengthens our faith, and prepares us to help others.”

Writing this book, so many times I have wished I could promise more. I wish I could encourage Christians, as some do, to “name it and claim it!” I wish I could raise expectations that God will change the rules on our behalf and make life easier, not harder. Every time I wish that, I face the temptation of childish faith – the very temptation that Jesus resisted in the wilderness.’

So to summarise this week’s lesson:

- 1) We all have faith in something and we choose, consciously or otherwise, what we put our faith in. We need to reflect on whether our choices have been good ones.
- 2) God is pleased when we put our faith in him, and wants us to have the attitude of a child who knows how to trust God like they would a good parent, but we need to get right what it is we are putting our faith in God to do.
- 3) As we humanly and spiritually mature, so our understanding of who God is and the things that are on his heart for us to desire and pray for will change.
- 4) We also have to develop our ability to listen and hear what it is that God wants us to pray for in faith, bringing our thinking and our will in line with his. When we have done this, then we can (and should) pray bold prayers.

End of Summary

Home work

Distribute the handouts.

Individual Exercise: Spend the fifteen minutes each day reflecting on what the other person said in the class exercise in your doubles, and pray for what God tells you to pray for. It may be that during the week your prayer for that person will change. Keep a note of this as you will be discussing this with the other person at the beginning of the next lesson.

Read chapters 5 & 18 of the course book.

Prayer Triplet Exercise: Discuss in your groups the difference between child-like and childish faith. Then have an open time of prayer for each other that God might lead you into a greater maturity, and wait on him for words of encouragement and knowledge.

And finally...

The class will end with one person praying.

OR

The class will end with a time of open prayer.

If a particular need has come up for someone during this class and the person would like prayer for themselves, invite those in the class who want to, to stay behind and pray for this person. One idea is to place a seat in the middle of the room and invite the person to sit on it. When they have shared what they want prayer for, those who are praying should gather round to pray.

After Class Notes: