

Small Group Session 3.3

The Provocative Teacher



Jesus got right up the noses of the religious leaders of His day. His provocative teaching completely undermined their assumptions and values. He even went as far as saying that it was necessary to go beyond their goodness in order to enter God's kingdom (Matt 5:20). The reason He said this is because the goodness of the religious leaders was focussed entirely on the outward appearance of keeping the religious law. Jesus, however, identified the heart as the source of goodness (and badness). Today we consider some of Jesus' provocative ethical teachings in relation to the heart.

Let God Speak First

Take it in turns to read Psalm 139 verses 1-18 slowly together, each person reading one verse and then pausing before the next verse. As you pause between each verse, be attentive to what God might be saying to you individually.

Report Back

Discuss how each of you got on with the hour in complete solitude and discuss the plans you have made for a day or half day retreat.

Don't forget to go through last week's memory verses together.

Provocative Teaching

Read Matthew 7:17-18, and 12:33-35. Explain what Jesus is referring to when he uses the metaphors "good tree" and "bad tree".

In his article "Life in God"¹ Dallas Willard says:

"The good tree, as Jesus taught us, brings forth as a matter of course good fruit, and the bad tree brings forth bad. Both trees have a "deeper life." That deeper life is simply what they are on the inside, and how their 'insides' interact with their environment. Their deeper life determines what happens in the outer arena of action and appearance, where their fruit, good or bad, is known. Jesus' little brother James extends this metaphor: "Can a fig tree produce olives, my brothers, or a grapevine

produce figs?" (James 3:12). The deeper life of the fig results only in figs."

Read Matthew 5:20. What does Jesus mean when he says our righteousness must surpass that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law?



"So it is the deeper life of the soul that must be transformed if the fruit of action is to be good. If we are engaging with the pornography of sex and violence, or if we cannot control our anger or our tongue or our fists, we have to do what is necessary to change the deeper and deepest levels of our life. That is the only strategy that will actually work. This is what Jesus calls "going beyond the goodness of scribes and Pharisees, and thereby entering the kingdom of the heavens" (Matt. 5:20).

Read Matthew 23:25-28. Why does the strategy of trying to keep the law as exemplified by the Pharisees lead to hypocrisy?

"The scribes and Pharisees tried to be good by not doing anything wrong. It is a strategy bound to fail ... it always leads to hypocrisy (Luke 12:2). Imagine a grapevine pretending to be a fig tree by tying

figs to its branches. No one is really deceived.

Immediately after saying that our goodness must go beyond that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law for us to enter the Kingdom of God, Jesus goes on to give a host of examples of the 'laws' that the Pharisees attempted to keep, and in each case he points to the deeper conditions of the heart that are the focus of attention in kingdom of God.

Read Matthew 5:21-48 (if you have time continue this exercise through to the end of chapter 6). As you read make a list of all the 'laws' or sayings that the Jesus highlights and for each note down the corresponding state of heart which Jesus says needs to be addressed.

"The deeper life of the self must be exchanged, transformed into another one: the one which Jesus has. Although we endeavour to keep the law, that is not our strategy. Instead, we aim to become the kind of person who would naturally do what the law says. Just as a fig is the kind of tree that naturally bears figs. When Jesus blessed his killers from the cross, that was not hard for him. It was an expression of the deeper life in him. What would have been hard for him would be to curse his killers. That would be the fig tree producing olives.

Before you go ...

As usual, read through The Daily Discipline together and pray for each other before you leave.

¹ http://listserv.virtueonline.org/pipermail/virtueonline_listserv.virtueonline.org/1999-January/000106.html

The Daily Disciple

Prayer of the Heart



In "The Way of the Heart" Henri Nouwen says that "Silence and solitude can never be separated from the call to unceasing prayer. If solitude were primarily an escape from a busy job, and silence primarily an escape from a noisy milieu, they could easily become very self-centered forms of asceticism. But soli-

tude and silence are for prayer. The Desert Fathers did not think of solitude as being alone, but as being alone with God. They did not think of silence as not speaking, but as listening to God. Solitude and silence are the context within which prayer is practiced" (p59).

Henri Nouwen has studied the writings of the Desert Fathers (and Mothers), a group of Christian hermits who lived mainly in the deserts of Egypt in the third century AD. The Desert Fathers actively sought solitude and silence, withdrawing from society for long periods of time. Nouwen explain that St. Anthony, commonly regarded of as the 'father of monks', "... withdrew into the desert, where for twenty years he lived in complete solitude. During these years Anthony experienced a terrible trial. The shell of his superficial securities was cracked and the abyss of iniquity was opened to him. But he came out of this trial victoriously—not because of his own willpower or ascetic exploits, but because of his unconditional surrender to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. When he emerged from his solitude, people recognised in him the qualities of an authentic 'healthy' man, whole in body, mind and soul." (p11)

St Arsenious is one of the most highly regarded and influential figures of the Desert Fathers. The story goes that one day as he prayed "Lord, lead me into the way of salvation" he heard a voice saying, "Be silent, pray always". Nouwen explains that "The literal translation of the words 'pray always' is 'come to rest'. The Greek word for rest is hesychia, ... A hesychast is a man or a woman who seeks solitude and silence as the ways to unceasing prayer. The prayer of the hesychasts is a prayer of rest. This rest, however, has little to do with the absence of conflict or pain. It is a rest in God in the midst of a very intense daily struggle." (pp59-60).

Nouwen observes that we have a tendency to think of prayer "primarily as an activity of the mind that involves above all else our

intellectual capacities. This prejudice reduces prayer to speaking with God or thinking about God." (p61). Hesychastic prayer, on the other hand, is **prayer of the heart**. It "leads to the rest where the soul can dwell with God" (p65). Nouwen suggests that to enter this rest we need to learn to pray with and from the heart.



"We find the best formulation of the prayer of the heart in the words of the Russian mystic Theophan the Recluse: 'To pray is to descend with the mind into the heart, and there to stand before the face of the Lord, ever-present, all-seeing, within you'. All through the centuries, this view of prayer has been central in hesychasm. ... "We have to realize that here the word heart is used in its full biblical meaning. In our milieu the word heart has become a soft word. It refers to the seat of the sentimental life. ... But the word heart in the Jewish-Christian tradition refers to the source of all physical, emotional, intellectual, volitional and moral energies.

"From the heart arise unknowable impulses as well as conscious feelings, moods, and wishes. The heart, too, has its reasons and is the center of perception and understanding. Finally, the heart is the seat of the will: it makes plans and comes to good decisions. Thus the heart is the central and unifying organ of our personal life. Our heart determines our personality, and is therefore not only the place where God dwells but also the place to which Satan directs his fiercest attacks. It is the heart that is the place of prayer. ... How can we, who are not monks and do not live in the desert, practice the prayer of the heart? ... The answer to these questions lies in the formulation of a definite discipline, a rule of prayer. There are three characteristics of the prayer of the heart that can help us to formulate this discipline:

- The prayer of the heart is nurtured by short, simple prayers.
- The prayer of the heart is unceasing.
- The prayer of the heart is all-inclusive.

(pp65-69)

In 1 Thessalonians 5:17 Paul instructs us to "pray without ceasing". How is this possible for someone who is busy with many other things? Nouwen suggests two approaches. The first is to learn how to pray while doing whatever it is we do in our daily lives, especially when this involves doing something for others (your family, your boss, your neighbour, your friend). Do whatever you do in

humble service to God and for His glory.

The second approach to developing the habit of unceasing prayer that Nouwen suggests is to repeat a short prayer often enough for it to become rooted in our hearts. Nouwen illustrates this with a quote from R. M. French's *The Way of the Pilgrim*: "Ceaseless interior prayer is a continual yearning of the human spirit towards God. To succeed in this consoling exercise we must pray more often to God to teach us to pray without ceasing. Pray more, and pray more fervently. It is prayer itself which will reveal to you how it can be achieved unceasingly; but it will take some time". In the story of *The Way of the Pilgrim*, the central character (a peasant) is taught the Jesus Prayer: 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.' "While traveling as a pilgrim through Russia, the peasant repeats this prayer a thousand time with his lips. ... And then one day he has the feeling that the prayer by its own action passes from his lips to his heart. ... 'I gave up saying the Prayer with my lips. I simply listened carefully to what my heart was saying'.

Try one of the two methods that Nouwen recommends for learning how to pray unceasingly. If you choose the first method, see if you can manage to do this for one hour. If you choose the second, decide what your short prayer will say and then see if you can continually repeat the prayer over a one hour period.

Finalise your plans for a day or half day retreat. Find a retreat centre that is not too far away and make the booking. If necessary, enlist the help of the others in your small group to support you (e.g. in providing child care).

Memory Verses

Week 1: Matthew 5:7

**Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.**

Week 2: Matthew 5:8

**Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.**

Week 1	Week 2
Matthew 21:1-17	Matthew 23:1-22
Matthew 21:18-32	Matthew 23:23-39
Matthew 21:33-46	Matthew 24:1-35
Matthew 22:1-22	Matthew 24:36-51
Matthew 22:23-46	Matthew 25:1-13