

Small Group Resources for September 2017

Throughout September we will be revisiting our vision and values as a church. Let me remind you what these are:

Our Vision:

Growing fruitful followers of Jesus...

through the planting and tending of Worshipping, Discipling, Missional Communities

Our Values

Seeking God and working things out

Growing Christ-like together

Collaborating in Mission

Enabling service and leadership

Small group resources for the month have been prepared in more detail than usual, providing some reading and a number of discussion and prayer activities. There is more here than can be managed in one meeting, so I would encourage you to work at the pace that is right for your group and to use the materials over however many sessions are available to you in September (I am aware that groups will not all start up in the same week). You do not need to follow every suggestion or complete every task – do what is right for you group!

I have not included separate welcome and worship ideas, though some of the activities might serve these purposes.

So let's get started. In my opening sermon in our vision series, I focused on two of our values...

1 Seeking God

❖ *Read Psalm 105:4*

The habit of seeking God is fundamental to our health and effectiveness as a community.

❖ *How well do you think we are keeping this priority in our life together?*

A new piece of furniture has been added to the church lounge - it is actually a self-assembly bedside cabinet, but is functioning as a simple aid to prayer, marking out a corner of the room where people can gather at various times to seek the Lord. There is candle on top that can be lit. The drawer contains some prayer resources - including a morning, mid-day and evening prayer liturgy. The cupboard below holds some of the gifts we have received from our various mission partners that can be brought out at different times to prompt our prayers. There is also a note book for writing down anything you feel God may be saying to the church - including

scriptures, pictures and prayers.

We (Ministry Team) want to encourage you to use this space for prayer. Clearly there will be times when the room is in use for various activities, but there is a lot of time when it is free. You can come any time it is available to be still for a few moments and seek God, making use of the resources in the cabinet. There will also be some set times for prayer which all are welcome to:

- Monday evening at 7.30 pm (once a month moving to the Sanctuary)
- Wednesday at mid-day
- Thursday morning at 7 am
- Friday at mid-day

Sometimes there are prayer meetings for particular causes and missions – such as for *Happy Child* and *Open Doors*.

Of course, there are many other times and places to pray - on our own, with friends, in our small groups, in corporate worship and in our workplaces. Yet, we would like this simple place of prayer to be a symbol and encouragement to us all to keep to our priority to seek the Lord always.

- ❖ *Talk together about how we can strengthen prayer in our own lives and in the life of our church. Do share any ideas you have with any of the Leaders at BBC.*
- ❖ *Have you read anything good on prayer recently? I (Steve) have been much helped and inspired by Pete Grieg's 'Dirty Glory'. Share what you have been learning.*
- ❖ *What are you going to do about strengthening your prayer life? Share your ideas and agree on what you will do - make sure you come back to this and ask each other how it is going...*

One other idea that we are pursuing is the establishing of a prayer space at Leatherhead Leisure Centre. We have the room and the cooperation of the centre. *If you would like to be involved in this - speak to Adam or Sarah Landen, James or Liz Featherstone, or me.*

2 Growing Christ-like together

I recently saw a plaque on a wall with following inscription:

'William Thompson (Bendigo) 1811-1880. All-England champion bare-knuckle prize fighter, reformed drunkard turned evangelist, retired to a cottage on this site.'

The inscription tells a story of transformation: one man whose life was changed by the gospel and became a means of change for others. Not all our stories sound this dramatic, but all of us who have come to know and follow Christ have a transformation story (a work in progress).

- ❖ *Find some time to share your stories with one another - not necessarily here and now, but agree some time to do this...*

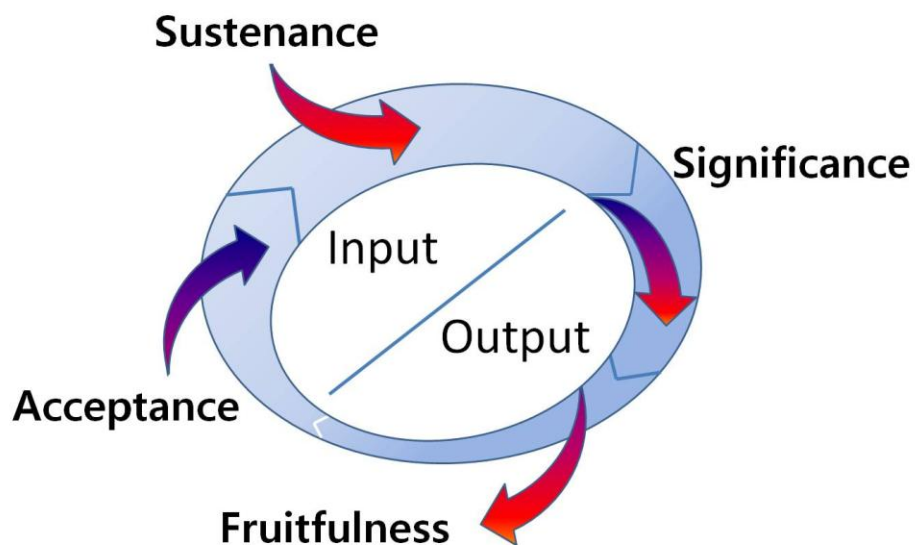
Or

- ❖ *Come up with a plaque for your own life (to date, it doesn't have to be an obituary!) - help each other with this.*
- ❖ *Read Romans 12: 1-2, 2 Corinthians 3:17-18*
- ❖ *These verses would be great for some lectio divina style reflection...*
- ❖ *How does 2 Cor. 3 v 18 help us make a connection between seeking God and growing Christlike?*

Transformation = growing Christ-like = our second value. What does this look like in practice?

During my Sabbatical, I spent some time exploring a simple model of spiritual growth that was devised by Frank Lake and Emile Brunner. It is known as **the Cycle of Grace**. I am going to set out the main ideas here, but would recommend that you listen to my sermon on Sunday 2 September (9 or 11) for an introduction to the model.

Lake and Brunner began with a concern for missionaries who were burning out on the mission field. They were looking for an answer to the question: how can a life of service for Christ be sustained? For inspiration, they looked to the life and ministry of Jesus and discerned *the Cycle of Grace*. The diagram below illustrates the cycle.



NOTE: there are resources available to pursue the cycle in more depth than what follows. There is a book by Trevor Hudson and Jerry P. Haas, entitled *The Cycle of Grace: Living in Sacred Balance*, as well some short videos that can be easily accessed on *Youtube*. These have the following titles:

Cycle of Grace 1: Acceptance (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0X6m_itTrsU)

Cycle of Grace 2: Sustenance (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KtzH5SiZeiU>)

Cycle of Grace 3: Significance (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g7LRf1lvDk4>)

Cycle of Grace 4: Fruitfulness (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z2wK0ghuJ2k>)

Cycle of Grace 5: A Grace-filled way to live (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E9-U9drJm4s>)

These are no more than 15 minutes each and you may decide to make use of them in your groups as you work through the following, showing the relevant video before each section. (This is not essential, as the notes will serve well enough on their own.)

ACCEPTANCE

This element of the cycle is revealed beautifully and powerfully at the Baptist of Jesus. As Jesus comes up out of the water, the heavens are torn open and he hears the Father say, 'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.' This happens before Jesus begins his public ministry. He stands as God's beloved Son.

For us too, the Cycle of Grace begins with acceptance. The return of the prodigal son gives us another vivid and beautiful image to help us understand this: the Father embraces his wayward son (before any formal apology or confession is attempted by the son) - he is radically accepted, beloved of the Father. This is grace: we are loved by the Father and accepted. We understand, of course, from the rest of the New Testament, that it is on the basis of Christ's sacrifice, his life poured out for us, that we given this gift.

- ❖ *How have you experienced the love of God? How convinced are you of your acceptance in Christ - that you are beloved of God?*

SUSTENANCE

Lake and Brunner saw that Jesus had a range of sustaining practices - ways in which he actively drew upon and gave himself to his relationship with the Father (letting grace flow freely in and through him). These included prayer, often rising early to seek the face of the Father, a deep knowledge of the Scriptures, and friendship (think particularly of his closeness to James, Peter and John).

- ❖ *Think about other things that Jesus did to be sustained within his relationship with the Father.*

We too need to develop sustaining practices - habits that enable us live out of our acceptance in Christ. We might think of these as ways in which we allow grace to enter and empower our living.

- ❖ *What are the things you need to do to sustain your spiritual life (allowing grace to enter and shape your life)? This would be a good question to tackle in pairs or groups of three, so that you can help each other think it through.*

We can think about this as individuals. We can also think about it as a community (sustaining our life together in Christ).

- ❖ *Read Romans 12: 9-21 as one rich portrait of a community that is practicing things that sustain its life. How many sustaining practices can you count?*

Some of you will remember the series 'Emotionally Healthy Spirituality' which held out the idea of a 'rule of life' - the trellis of habits and practices on which our spiritual life grows and bears fruit. At that time we were encouraged to identify the habits and practices we needed to grow as disciples of Jesus. This might be a good thing to return to - again, working in twos or threes would probably work best...

- ❖ *See if you can each make a list (not too long) to work on and to review at some point in the future. It is likely that there are things you are already doing as well as new things to try. Be specific and think about how each commitment is going to work in practice - e.g., 'I am going to take a walk three times a week to be in conversation with God and listen for his voice', or 'I am going rise earlier to spend half an hour each day to pray, or 'I am going to start an exercise class', or 'I am going to invite someone I don't know very well to lunch once a month (practice hospitality), and so on.*

SIGNIFICANCE

- ❖ *Read Romans 12: 3-8*

Without doubt, the life of Christ held incredible significance for the whole world. Another way to put this is that Jesus signified (or was a sign of) God's salvation and His Kingdom. We can hardly compare ourselves with our Lord in this, yet each of our lives holds significance - pointing to something bigger than ourselves. Our lives signify the Kingdom of God - when people meet us and get to know us, they come to see this and touch it.

Our life begins in the soil of acceptance (we are God's beloved) and is sustained (and grows) through sustaining practices. As we grow, we begin to discover our significance in God's Kingdom, which will be unique - for each of us is fashioned uniquely by God. Another way to get at this truth is to talk about 'calling' - what it is that we are shaped for in the world.

I came across a helpful way to think about this: that everyone has

- A song to sing
- A message to deliver
- A special way of being in the World

Coming to understand what our life signifies (our calling) is profoundly releasing, giving direction to our lives. When the New Testament speaks of the different gifts

given to church, then it is getting at the matter of calling.

- ❖ *See Romans 12: 3-8 as a good example of this.*
- ❖ *Take some time in pairs or threes to share your sense of your gifts and your calling as a disciple of Jesus. How is your calling being expressed in your family, your church and in the world?*

Paul Lambert will be preaching on this aspect of the cycle of Grace on Sunday 17th September, and will no doubt bring more insight to knowing what we are each called to. *Don't miss it!*

One further thought on significance: when we come to understand our calling as God's people (collectively), we are motivated for holiness. A number of biblical passages convey this - including Romans 13:11-14 where Paul reminds his readers that we are a people living towards a great liberation. 'The night is nearly over; the day is almost here' entreats Paul. Therefore, he goes on, 'let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light. Let us behave decently... not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Understanding who we are (our significance in the world) helps us to deal with things that do not befit our calling.

- ❖ *In pairs and threes, take time to talk about the temptations and weaknesses that get in the way of your growing in Christ and bearing fruit as his followers. Get serious in dealing with your sinful nature - confessing your sin and praying for one another.*

FRUITFULNESS

There can be no doubting the fruitfulness of Jesus' life (and death and resurrection). We see grace pouring out of his life to transform all those around him. We see rejected accepted. We see the untouchable embraced. We see the sick healed. We see forgiven lives flourishing. In short, we see the Kingdom of God coming in power. We all, of course, are included in the fruit of Jesus' self-giving.

For us also there is fruit. That is the natural order of things. A life rooted in love, nourished in life-giving disciplines and lived purposefully (calling) will bring forth fruit. This will include our characters and the impact of our lives on others.

- ❖ *Take some time in twos or threes to identify the fruit of your following Jesus. How has God changed you? How has he worked through you? What fruit do you hope and long for?*
- ❖ *Pray together for fruitfulness in your lives and in the life of Bookham Baptist Church. Pray fervently.*

Turn it round (or rather, don't!)

Having laid out the cycle of grace, Lake and Brunner do something rather arresting. They reverse it - or rather, show how it might be attempted in reverse, starting with

fruitfulness (or achievement) and then moving in the wrong direction around the cycle. So a person might seek to attain certain goals or ambitions, believing that their significance rests in doing so and that such achievements will somehow sustain them and even gain the love of others. Lake calls this *the Cycle of works*. Arguably this reversed cycle exposes what most people are doing - trying to find significance and worth in their work, possessions, achievements, or even in relationships (a successful marriage, etc). The radical truth of the Gospel is that we only find significance and worth in the acceptance of the Father - in being the beloved.

- ❖ *Talk about this. Do you think the insight offered here is true? Can you see the attempt to reverse the cycle in your own history and experience? Can you see it in the lives of the people you know?*
- ❖ *Here is another opportunity to get into some life-giving confession and prayer for forgiveness and renewal. Again, this is probably best done in twos and threes. Pray for the people you know too - bringing them by name to the Lord, calling out for their salvation, that they might know how they are loved and be set free.*

Spiritual Friendship - growing in grace with a little help from our friends

As we have worked around the cycle of Grace, you have been encouraged to get into pairs and threes to talk about each element, making application to your lives. In doing this, you have been practicing *spiritual friendship*. I strongly believe that we are meant to be involved in each other's spiritual growth in this way - opening our lives to one another and helping each other to grow in grace and to bear fruit.

Spiritual friendship is not a term you will find in the Bible, but there is plenty of it going on within its pages. There are some striking examples: such as the beautiful friendships of David & Jonathan and Naomi & Ruth in the Old Testament (our next preaching series is on the book of Ruth). In the New Testament we see Jesus' close relationships with three of his disciples: James, Peter and John. Then there's Paul and Timothy: an older, seasoned follower of Christ investing in a younger Christian leader.

- ❖ *Check out the passages below to see how spiritual friendship plays out in the lives of these people of God.*

Ruth 1:16-17 - Naomi and Ruth
1 Samuel 23:15-18 - David and Jonathan
Mark 9:2-4 and 14:32-34 - Jesus, Peter, James and John
Acts 9: 26-27, 11:25-26 - Barnabas and Paul
Acts 16:1-5 and 2 Timothy 1:1-14 - Paul and Timothy

Apart from the standout examples, there are also those passionate exhortations to the Christian life, such as we recently came across in Roman 12 (verses 9-21), where it is difficult to imagine any kind of real success in growing a Christian community without active spiritual friendship. *Take another look and you will see what I mean.*

Spiritual friendship, I believe, is a vital gift and resource for discipleship today. We need each other. In essence, it is about developing relationships that help us to grow in Christ. This includes working on our relationships generally - which means spending time together (such as in our small groups), working on openness and honesty in our conversations, serving and taking time to pray for and encourage one another in our discipleship.

- ❖ *Talk together about how we can deepen and strengthen our relationships at BBC.*

Spiritual friendship can also take more particular expression - where, for example, two people agree to meet regularly to share their walk with Christ and to pray together. This could be on an equal footing (mutual) or it might be that a more mature Christian meets regularly with a newer Christian to encourage him/her in the faith. All kinds of arrangements are possible: an older man might meet with a teenager; or a group of three might meet to encourage each other in the faith; or a few people might agree to meet for a short period of time only (say for a few months) to pray into a particular issue.

- ❖ I would like to encourage you all to be thinking about what you need and how you might be of help to others. With this in mind, give some thought to the following questions:

1 Who is helping me in my Spiritual Life at present?

2 Who am I encouraging to grow?

- ❖ *For both questions, think about the informal interactions you have with others (e.g., who do you find encouraging to be around) as well as any more specific arrangements you may have made.*
- ❖ *Think and pray about who you might approach to develop a spiritual friendship - have the courage to take action.*

Resources for Spiritual Friendship

A spiritual friendship could be based simply on an agreement to pray together regularly. However, it can be helpful to have some resources to hand.

- The cycle of grace with its four main elements of spiritual growth and wellbeing might provide a really good basis for spiritual conversation. You could take one of the elements (acceptance, sustenance, etc) each time you meet and talk about your spiritual life.
- There is a simple profound question that could form the basis of every time you meet: 'What are God and you working on at present?'
- There are of course countless devotional books available that might provide you with inspiration and stimulation. You could agree to cover a chapter each time you meet for example.