

Aim of lesson

To help the young people to get into the habit of turning to God regularly and readily, and to learn the balance between reverence and directness, humility and confidence.

Bible background

Jeremiah 18:1-6; Matthew 6:9-13; Daniel 9.

Preparation required

Pray about the lesson! Try to think of some helpful examples of prayer from your own experience or that of others. Young people are often very prayerful, and you should not necessarily approach the subject with the attitude that this is a difficult subject.

Suggested outline of lesson

This lesson is essentially a practical one and the more you and the young people can talk openly about your attitudes and experiences, and learn together from scripture, the better. Don't feel that the pages in the students' notes must be completed. They are there only if the young people find them useful, and to help to structure the discussion.

Our Attitude

Before approaching God we should remember that he is:

- The sovereign Lord, almighty in all things.
- Aware of our hopes, needs, strengths and weaknesses before we speak.
- Our loving Father. 'And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.' (Galatians 4:6).

Clay and Potter

A topic you may like to discuss is the respective roles of the potter and the clay applying the lesson to our attitude to God before we approach him. Get the young people to look at the passages listed in their notes, maybe sharing the verses among them.

In summarising these passages they should note the following points:

- We are like the clay in that we come from the earth like Adam did.

- God shapes us as he wants, and has the right to do with us what he wants.
- We have no right to argue with him, or to complain about what happens to us.

How to be good clay

The young people will probably have done some pottery at school. Ask them about the clay, and what it should be like in order to make a good pot.

- It needs to be pliable - it's not possible to work with hard, brittle, clay.
- It needs to be free of lumps or foreign bodies, and even in texture.
- It must not have any air bubbles in it, or else it will be difficult to mould and will explode in the kiln.

Ask the young people to think about these things in the context of our lives. We need to allow God to work in our lives, without any hard resistant parts, and free from the valueless things that can occupy much of our lives.

Pottery

Now get them to think about how the potter prepares the clay, and how these steps compare with the experience of our lives.

- He removes it from the earth - we are separated from mankind.
- He wets it - we are baptised.
- He kneads it, often very hard, to obtain a smooth, malleable texture - God uses the experiences of our lives, often unpleasant to us, in order to teach us.
- He shapes it into the form he wants - God moulds our personalities, in the ways we considered in the topic on 'God in our lives'.
- He fires it to be tough - he enables us to withstand temptation.
- He glazes it to be beautiful and long-lasting - he prepares us for eternity.

It is all summed up in the words 'Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time' (1 Peter 5:6).

Approach

Ask the young people to summarise what should be our frame of mind when we pray. Important thoughts are: humility, sincerity, recognising that God is all powerful and is able to do anything he wishes, trusting that God will act for our good, knowing that he is listening to what we are saying.

You could discuss the style of language we should use. Using Shakespearean English does not of itself add to a prayer, though it is important that we should use

reverent language. On the other hand the 'buzz' words of the day may convey a spirit of familiarity which is inappropriate when approaching the Almighty.

It is worth dwelling for a moment on the phrases that we use at the end of prayers, and thinking of their meaning.

'... in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord'

The only specific use of this phrase in the context of prayer is in Ephesians 5:20, though there is a similar passage in Colossians 3:17. What does it mean?

Acts 3:6; 5:40; 9:27-28 are just a few examples (of many) where the phrase is used of the words and actions of the apostles and of believers in general. The point is that the Lord Jesus was not there in person; his days of teaching and healing directly were over, until he returns. But in his place he had left disciples to continue his work and to speak and act on his behalf. So they spoke 'in the name of Jesus', as though they were him.

In the same way, we pray in his name. We do not come to God in our own name, as Darren, or Chloe, Neil or Rebekah, but bearing the name of Jesus. Hence the phrase in Acts 19:5, where the people of Ephesus were 'baptized in' (NIV 'into') the name of the Lord Jesus. 'All of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ' (Galatians 3:27, NIV).

'... for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord'

There is one New Testament passage which could relate to the way it is used at the end of a prayer: Ephesians 4:32 'And be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you' (the NIV has 'in Christ God forgave you'). In other words, God has forgiven us not because we deserved it but because of what Jesus did in his life and death.

The content of our prayers

Consider the Lord's prayer, for example in Matthew 6:9-13. You may like to discuss:

- The elements of the prayer - praise, prayer for God's kingdom to come, requests for sustenance, forgiveness, commitment to forgive others (see v14-15), request for guidance and deliverance, praise. It is easy for our personal prayers to neglect the first two aspects of the Lord's prayer.
- The things God possesses - thy name, kingdom, will.
- The things we 'possess' - our Father, daily bread, sins.
- The requests - give us, forgive us, lead us, deliver us.

Starting points

Discuss with the young people how we can get into the way of praying more readily, though be aware that young people often pray much more naturally than adults do. It may have something to do with the words of Jesus 'I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 18:3).

It is good to get into the habit of praying every morning and night - in the morning the prayer can focus on the day ahead, and asking God for help and guidance; in the evening we can look back and give thanks for what has happened and ask him to forgive our sins and weaknesses.

It is helpful also to whisper a word of thanks to God for every pleasing detail of daily life - it is a recognition of his goodness and unfailing love. A silent plea to God for immediate help is illustrated in the example of Nehemiah, chapter 2:1-5.

Another model prayer

If you have time you may like to think about the prayer recorded in Daniel chapter 9. The recognition of God's character, sin and punishment, prophecy and petition are all involved and Daniel did not distance himself from the past or present sins of the people although he was not personally involved. Although the sequence is different, many elements of the Lord's prayer are found here. Look in particular at verses 2,3,7,9,12,16, 17-18 and 19.

Relevance to our lives

We should be able to speak with God as would to a friend or a perfect parent, and should in doing so find 'grace to help in time of need'. In prayer we are not just asking God for things, but are offering our spirits to him, as incense was offered in the temple. Prayer can it itself change us, and put things in a new perspective.

Prayer

You could say the Lord's prayer together.

Other suggestions for activities

1. The Lord's prayer is used much less in schools than in the past, and the young people may not know it off by heart. If so, it would be worth suggesting that they learn it.
2. You may like to look at some of the Psalms, and see how in the course of his prayer the writer is changed. Psalm 73 is a good example; compare verse 3 and 12-13 with verses 16-17 and 27-28. Some other examples are Psalms 13, 22, 52, 56 and 57. Discuss with the young people how prayer can enable us to see

our lives in the right perspective. Often we start praying in one way, and by the time we have finished we are praying about, or for, something else altogether.