SM039 The Unexpected Guest

It was early in the morning. Jesus had long since been awake. Peter and James were awake also and they noticed that Jesus had walked a short distance from where they slept and that he was in prayer.

James said, "Peter, have you ever noticed how faithful Jesus is to pray? He is often up before anyone else and often in prayer early in the morning."

"Yes, I have, James, and I've tried to do the same, but I am usually so tired from the previous day's work I have a hard time getting up. I don't know how he does it."

"I don't know either. I've tried also, but so many times I haven't known what to say. My mind draws a blank. And Jesus' praying seems so different from the way we were taught in the synagogue. Jesus doesn't pray in the Hebrew language like the priests and leaders. He prays in the language we speak on the streets, Aramaic. Have you noticed that? And when he prays, he isn't just reciting words like we were taught but he seems to be in a conversation with God. It seems so warm and natural for him."

Jesus had now finished his praying. He stood up looked at Peter and James and the other disciples who were stirring by now and he smiled as if he were saying, "Why don't you come and ask me about prayer?"

A short while later, while they were all eating breakfast, James said, "Master, I would like to learn how to pray the way you pray. So many times I wake up early in the morning and you are already up and praying. And at times when I hear you, you seem to be praying in a way different than the official way we learned in the synagogue. When we were with John, he taught us some prayers, but will you teach us to pray?"

Jesus said, "Yes, I will teach you. Prayer will become very important for you. I know it is important for you now, but a day will come when it will be most important for you and for all who hear you for all of my disciples must learn to pray. When you pray, your prayer should be like this,

> 'Father, hallowed be Your name.
> Your kingdom come [and your will be done in earth as in heaven.]
> [3] 'Give us each day our daily bread.
> [4] 'And forgive us our sins,
> For we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us.
> And lead us not into temptation. [but deliver us from the evil one]

Jesus then explained, "Those are the main themes I keep in mind as I pray. First and foremost is the honoring of the name of our God. Our first prayer should be that God's name will be hallowed. In the world, God's name is dishonored every day, and, as we so well know, God's name is dishonored even among our people for they say one thing and do another. Some of the leaders of our people are in their positions of power for their own benefit. They have no care for the people. They would rather keep a

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man-made rule than help God's people in need. And that is because their hearts are not in the right place. They do not really want to honor God but they want to honor themselves, and so first, we should pray, 'Hallowed be your name.'"

Then, we should pray for God's will to be done on earth. If God's name is to be honored on earth and not blasphemed then people must want his will more than their own will, and we know what that means. That means that we should pray for God's kingdom to come. When God's kingdom comes in all its fullness and glory, then it will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. Every one in every place will honor God. Everything on earth will be set right. The earth will be set free and justice and righteousness will prevail over all. Until that glorious day, we must let God's kingdom come through us to the world. The kingdom does not just come at the end of the age. The kingdom comes now through us as we take the message of the kingdom to bring forgiveness and restoration of body, mind, and spirit to the hearts of our people who are lost and wandering like sheep without a shepherd.

Those are our two starting points for prayer – the name of God to be honored and the kingdom of God to be restored on earth. Then, we can pray for our own needs. Then we can pray for God to give us the bread we need for each day. When our priorities our right, when God's name and God's kingdom are foremost in our minds, then we can pray for our needs for then we will not be praying selfishly. We will be praying for our needs to be met – food, clothing, shelter – so that we will have the strength to proclaim his kingdom throughout the world and call men to give their allegiance to him.

And then there is one more important part of praying. When you pray, you must look to your heart again and if you find any bitterness in your heart toward your brother you must forgive him just as God forgives you when you confess your sins. It grieves the heart of God when his people do not forgive one another. God has forgiven so much. The debt of his people is so great to him. His people's debts to one another is slight compared to the debt owed him. Yet he forgives, and he wants his people to forgive each other. If his people do not, they open themselves up to all sorts of discipline and God allows even the evil one to come to his people and tempt them, to sift them like wheat, so that they will learn not to harbor ill will toward one another, but forgive from their hearts.

All of this is how you should pray. And you should pray it for the kingdom and the power, and the glory of God forever and ever.

Then, when Jesus had finished giving instructions on the basic way to pray to God, he told them a story. Jesus said,

"Let me tell you a story. This story will encourage you to pray for my Father wants you to come to him in prayer."

Then He said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to his friend at midnight – the middle of the night when all is dark and everyone is sound asleep. He wakes his friend saying to him, 'Please, lend me three loaves; for an unexpected guest, a friend of mine, has come to me from a journey, and what I have is not enough to set before him in an honorable way.

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So the man has now awakened his neighbor. But what will the neighbor say, "Do you think he is going to say, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been shut and my children and I are in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.'"

The disciples all laughed at that. They knew of course that the awakened man would never answer in such a manner. The rules of hospitality and of village honor were at stake and the man who was awakened, in order to preserve the village honor, would naturally rise up and help the man who was trying to be a good host to the guest who came at midnight.

Jesus continued,

"Yes, he is not going to get up because of friendship. But he is going to get up because of his concern to avoid shaming himself, shaming his friend, and shaming the village if they do not serve the unexpected guest. And so, in order to preserve honor, he will get up and give the man as much as he needs."

And in the same way, I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it will be opened.

Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake that looks like a fish, will he? Or if he is asked for an egg, he will not give him a scorpion that has rolled itself up into a little ball that looks like an egg, will he? Look, you, who are not perfect, you who have sin in your hearts still, know how to give good gifts to your children, and if you will do that for them, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?"

The disciples smiled. Their hearts were enriched by Jesus' instructions on what to say when praying and by his story that showed the heart of God towards them and when we come back we will enter into the world of the first century and learn more about Jesus' parable of the unexpected guest.

Interlude

The Unexpected Guest sometimes called The Friend Who Came at Midnight is a parable that Jesus told his disciples to encourage them to pray. But it is a parable that has been misunderstood for ages and the reason it has been misunderstood is that we have not understood the culture in which the story was told.

In the ancient world in the Middle East and in most places today in these lands one of the greatest values for people, families, and entire villages is honor. Above all, people want to maintain their family honor and the honor of their village and to avoid, at all costs, bringing shame to their family and village. People did not look upon themselves as individuals only, but they looked upon themselves as individuals who were part of a larger community whether this was a family, a clan, or a village. One's behavior was

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not just for himself, but one's behavior reflected upon the entire community, and people would pull together and join their resources when one member was in need to maintain the village name.

Such was the case with the story of the unexpected guest. In ancient Palestine, it was unusual and dangerous to travel at night. And so when the unexpected guest showed up at the home of his friend, the friend was startled and unprepared to serve him. He would be expected to serve his friend a meal, even if his friend were not hungry. But the bread he had eaten for that day was used up and his honor depended upon his ability to set a meal before the unexpected guest. But there was no more fresh food for that day.

And so the man did what he must do in his village to make sure that his guest was treated properly. He went to the home of someone he considered a friend and implored him to help. We might think this strange. In the story, it is midnight! And he goes to a neighbor at midnight to ask for help!

But so strong were the bonds of village honor that this behavior, while not daily behavior, was allowed and even expected for the entire village would be interested in making sure that the unexpected guest was shown proper hospitality

And so the man came to his neighbor at midnight, awakened him and said, "Friend. I need three loaves for a friend of mine has come on a journey and I have nothing to set before him." And while this statement was true, on the surface, we must dig a little bit deeper to understand it all.

First, he asks for three loaves. One loaf was enough to satisfy the guest, but he asks for three because he wants to set abundant provision before him.

Second, bread served a function besides food. Bread was the spoon and fork of that time. It was a utensil for in their style of eating, the main course would be placed in a large bowl, and fresh, unused bread would be given to each person at the table. It would be unthinkable to give stale, partially used bread to anyone. Each person would tear off a small piece and use it to dip into the bowl of food and bring food to the mouth. Piece by piece a person would break his bread and use it to satisfy his hunger.

Third, the host of the unexpected guest would need more than bread. He was not going to just give his guest bread and water. He was going to have to provide bread and other food and when the awakened man does get up, the story tells us that he gave him as much as he needed.

Fourth, when Jesus begins the story, he begins it in such a way to show that it would have been unthinkable for the awakened neighbor not to get up and help his friend who is trying to show hospitality to the unexpected guest. For the awakened man to say, "Don't bother me. The door is shut and my children and I are in bed and I can't get you anything," would have been shameful speech and would have been unthinkable in that culture.

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One scholar, who has lived in that part of the world and who has studied the ancient texts translates it this way,

"Can you imagine having a friend and going to him with the sacred request to help you entertain a guest, and then he offers silly excuses about sleeping children and a barred door?" When Jesus told this part of the story, his disciples must have laughed because it would have been unthinkable to react this way to a friend who is in a difficult situation. In that culture, the friend most likely would have awakened his children and had them help and taught them about village honor and hospitality. And so Jesus begins the story by explaining what the awakened man will not do and say before he tells them what he will do.

Once, a few years ago, two young men were camping in the Middle East. It was late at night, very quiet and they were scared. In the distance they saw the campfires of some Arab Bedouins and they decided to ask them for help that night. And so they picked up their bedrolls and walked to the edge of the camp where they surprised the Bedouins and in their broken Arab phrases asked for help.

The entire Bedouin campsite swung into action. They welcomed the young men, they picked up the best rug and dusted it off and made the young men sit upon it. Then, the cook carved off pieces of lamb that was roasting over a campfire and served a tasty meal to the young men while all sat around with smiles and laughter and good will. It was the sacred honor for all at that campsite to show hospitality to these men. These events that happened in our lifetime come from a culture that has not changed in thousands of years, going back to the time of Jesus and beyond. It was the sacred honor in the story for the people in the village to make sure that the unexpected guest would be cared for. And so when the man shows up at his friend's house at midnight, he did so because he knew that he could count on him to help him in his time of need.

And this brings us to a crucial point in the story that has been misunderstood for centuries. In most translations, we find Jesus saying, "because of the man's persistence, the awakened man gets up and gives him everything he needs." This gives us the picture that the man with the unexpected guest is being bothersome and won't go away until he receives help and that the awakened man reluctantly gets up and helps.

But this is not the picture at all and not true to life at that time. Jesus tells the story to explain how the awakened man will not act and how he will act. He will not get up just because he is bothered and is afraid of waking the children and wants his friend to go away. He will get up for another reason. He will get up because of his concern over shame and honor. The Greek word translated persistence does not mean that in the original language. It actually means "shameless" and what Jesus is saying is that the man who is awakened is a man who is without blame in his community. Instead he is a man with honor and a man who is concerned that he live his life without shame and that he is concerned about the village honor. He gets up and helps his friend in need, not because of friendship, but he gets up and helps his neighbor with the unexpected guest because he is a man who is very concerned about village shame and honor.

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And so Jesus, after telling his disciples how to pray, what basic words to use and how to address God, then tells this story that was understood in their culture. He tells them about a dilemma of hospitality, about a man in need to serve an unexpected guest, about this man going to his neighbor for help, about what the neighbor will not say and the excuses he will not make which would have been unthinkable and then what the neighbor will do and why he does it – he helps his friend at midnight with the meal because he is a man concerned with shame and honor in the village. He is a true neighbor and a man of integrity.

Jesus brings the lesson home. He tells the disciples, "in the same way, go to God and ask. Go to God and seek. Go to God and knock. Go to him at anytime. Go to him at midnight. Go to him when unexpected things come up. Go to him when you are in need and you don't have enough. And when you do, what you ask will be given to you. What you seek, you will find. And when you knock, the door will be opened to you."

Why can we have this kind of confidence? Why does Jesus want us to have this kind of confidence that if we ask we will receive, if we seek we will find, if we knock the door will be opened? It is because God in heaven is a God of honor. God in heaven is a God of integrity. God in heaven is a God who is concerned about our needs and about our need to maintain honor and dignity, even in the surprises of life, even in the surprises that come at midnight.

To encourage them further Jesus said, "If a son asks a father for a fish, he is not going to give him a snake is he?" The disciples must have smiled and laughed softly at this. How absurd would that be! In Israel, in the Sea of Galilee, at the bottom of the sea was a kind of fish that was shaped like an eel, or like a snake. This kind of fish was considered unclean to eat. What kind of father would hear his son's request for fish to eat and then serve that kind of snake-like fish to his son? That would be unthinkable.

Jesus used another illustration. In that part of the world a certain kind of scorpion could roll itself up into an egg-like shape. What if a son asked his father for an egg to eat and the father gave him a scorpion that looked like an egg? What kind of a father would that be? No father would play a cruel joke like that to a son that he loved.

And then Jesus said, "if you men, who are not perfect, who have sin in your lives would never do such a thing, do you think your Father in heaven would do that to you? He will not give you a snake instead of a fish, a scorpion instead of an egg. Your heavenly Father will give good gifts to his children. Your heavenly Father will give the Holy Spirit to his children one day."

The lesson was over. The disciples had heard enough for that time. Jesus had instructed them in the way of prayer and in the heart of a Father who would maintain the honor of his name and hear their requests even in difficult times and who would not trick them with evil things but would give them good gifts.

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They packed up their belongings and set back on the road to do God's will for that day, to hallow his name and to bring his kingdom to the needy people of the world.

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