

# Unexpected Inclusivity

September 13, 2020



## Daily Devotionals Introduction

As you read about Jesus in the Gospels, you might see some things that perhaps you weren't expecting. For this 13-week series, we'll open the Book of Mark together and study the life of Jesus—The Unexpected King. During this series, we will gain a better understanding of who Jesus is and what it really means to be his disciple.

As an individual or as a family, use these daily devotionals and reflection questions to connect with Jesus each day this week.

Each day, there will be a thought stemming from our Scripture passage along with 2-3 questions. Our hope is that as we journey together through the book of Mark, we'll be able to come out the other side knowing more about the life of Jesus.

Be sure to prayerfully consider each day's truth, passages, and each of the questions. If you are a part of a life group, let these devotionals stir your thinking and be the foundation for your group conversation.

Our prayer is that these devotionals, questions, and reflections will help you love God, love people, and make disciples.

## Day 1

For many years my family has vacationed on the island of Maui. We have rented condos in the same complex for over 25 years. The condos are old and dated, but the beachfront location and sparkling pool can't be topped. The condo complex has a multi-page document you have to sign every visit that lists all rules and regulations. The rules range from listing the pool hours to removing your shoes when you enter the residence (an island-wide practice).

Then, there are the unspoken rules. The unspoken rules primarily pertain to the use of the lounge chairs and the community BBQ. My dad is a faithful follower and *enforcer* of proper chair and BBQ etiquette. The unspoken rules, or as my dad would call it, the "social contract" of K'Nai a Nalu is that you do not reserve prime ocean viewing spots unless you are actually occupying the chair and if someone has placed their meat next to the BBQ, they are next in line to cook.

While my mom and I take great joy in teasing my dad for his militant stance on chair and BBQ misuse, I have often wondered how much the perseveration of the social contract and ultimately his frustration with non-compliance distracts him the main point of his visit – rest, relaxation, and recreation. His original motivations may have been well meaning, but ultimately distort the experience of the vacation.

Mark Chapter 7 opens up with the Pharisees rebuking Jesus' disciples for not washing their hands before their meal. The Pharisees had traveled from Jerusalem to Galilee as a delegation to monitor and evaluate the ministry of Jesus. The original intent of their journey was reasonable. They were serving to protect Israel from a possible false prophet. However, they had already made up their mind about Jesus and his ministry and they were using the enforcement of their religious traditions to confirm their conclusion.

Jesus responded by quoting Isaiah 29, saying, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules."

He further told the Pharisees that doing acts of worship and their adherence to the traditions of their elders may result in an outwardly appearance of godliness, but they didn't actually love God. They were confusing religious acts with righteousness. Relationship with God, not adherence to the law, is the real measure of righteousness.

Oftentimes it seems it is easier to DO for God instead of BEING with God. The confines of religious traditions can feel safe and comforting. Yet, observance of tradition alone is rarely transformative. Jesus came to introduce a new paradigm, a kingdom designed to transform hearts and minds. Laws and traditions condition behavior. Love conditions the heart.

Questions for reflection:

- Take some time to think about the spoken *and* unspoken rules or traditions in the different areas of your life (your family of origin, friend groups, teams, church, organizations, etc.).
- Is your motivation following the rules or following a person?
- What's one way you contribute to the creation and enforcement of the "social contract" in your sphere of influence?

**Prayer:** Invite God to examine your heart and reveal areas of your life where human tradition or religion take precedence over God's commands.

## Day 2

Yesterday, we touched upon how fixating on laws and rituals are poor a substitute for seeking righteousness. They often stand in the way of how God commands us to live. Traditions and rituals aren't the only crutch we lean on to avoid intimacy with God. We will go to great lengths to fix on the outside what is actually broken on the inside.

Over the years, I have had the privilege of providing pastoral care to dozens of families during the death of a loved one. One particular family asked me to come to the hospital at the request of their dying father. I didn't know the family well and had never spoken with his wife, but I was honored to minister to them during their time of grief.

Over the course of several visits, I couldn't help but notice how beautifully the man's wife was dressed every day. Her hair was perfectly coiffed, her face made up, and her neck and ears adorned with beautiful jewelry. We quickly became friends and at one point, after her husband had died, I remarked on how she was always beautifully dressed, even in her husband's final hours. Her response was simple and blunt. "He (her husband) always liked it when I dressed up and I figured if I continued to do it, no one would know what's going on inside."

Her original motivations may have been to put her husband and family at ease during a deeply painful time, but as I got to know her more during her grieving, I realized the person she was really protecting was herself.

The thing is, we can't mask what is broken and hurting on the inside by dressing up the outside. Our rituals and outward behavior will not bring us into true communion with Christ because those things do not reflect his primary concern. He is concerned with our hearts. He longs to be invited into our brokenness, so he can bring about the healing and transformation that only comes through true relationship with the Savior.

After scolding the Pharisees, Jesus spent time explaining to his disciples that it was not the absence of ceremonial washing or the eating of certain foods that made someone unclean. What made someone unclean had to do with what comes from within. Evil thoughts and actions come from the heart and become an obstacle to truly knowing God.

It is not uncommon, nor particularly harmful to care for our external needs when wrestling with inner turmoil. However, if we neglect to tend to the healing of our brokenness, it will multiply and begin to impact those around us through what we say and how we live.

Questions for reflection:

- In Mark 7:23, Jesus says what's inside us will determine what comes out of us. What are you allowing to influence your heart? What needs to change?
- What's one way Jesus has changed you?
- Who can you tell about how Jesus has changed you?

**Prayer:** Invite God to examine your heart and reveal areas of sin and painful emotions that you are avoiding dealing with.

### Day 3

So far this week, we have seen how God looks at our hearts to measure our righteousness, not our practice of religious laws and traditions. In fact, in Mark 7:18-19 Jesus clarified this principle for his confused disciples to help them see there were no longer any unclean foods. Everyone was on equal footing. If that wasn't a statement of unexpected inclusivity, I don't know what is!

Up until then, Jesus' ministry had been exclusively to the Jews, but now He and the disciples were intentionally traveling into Gentile territory and ministering to a whole group of people who the Jews had categorically regarded as unclean. Even the disciples were shocked when Jesus interacted with the Gentiles.

As Jesus moved into the region of Tyre, He encountered a woman desperately seeking healing for her daughter who was possessed by an evil spirit. Read about her interaction with Jesus in Mark 7:24-30.

As a Gentile and a female, this woman would have automatically been considered unclean in Jewish culture. Mark referred to her as a Syrophenician woman, specifying that she was from Phoenicia, a particularly unsavory part of town. In the book of Matthew, a gospel penned to elite Jews, she was referred to as a Canaanite, which was the equivalent of a modern-day racial slur. This woman was not well regarded. Yet, this interaction continues to reveal the identity of Jesus and the nature of the Kingdom of God.

Does Jesus' initial response to her request surprise you? Does it make you bristle? There are varying interpretations of the reasoning for Jesus' response, but one thing is clear – the Gentile woman is included in the Kingdom of God. Jesus commended her great faith and healed her daughter. The disciples continued to misunderstand Jesus' mission and could not wrap their heads around the fact that the only thing that keeps us from God's Kingdom is rejection of His invitation.

A dear friend of mine is a minister at another church. She was sharing a staff dialogue about practices at their church that needed to be eliminated. My friend identified the sweater closet, a place holding cardigans of all different sizes reserved for women whose clothing was regarded as immodest. At first, I thought she was kidding. When I realized she wasn't, I was immediately saddened over the shame women must have felt when asked to wear one of the sweaters.

Like the disciples, my friend's church had drawn a line on what they considered clean or unclean. What about you?

The inclusion of the Kingdom is described in Genesis 12 where God called Abraham and told him that *all* the nations of the world would be blessed through him. Not some nations. Not only Jewish nations. ALL nations. In Galatians 3:26-29, Paul reinforces the fulfillment of scripture declaring the inclusion of the Kingdom specifically in verse 28, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Several weeks ago, Dan and Darnell preached on equality and reminded us of the theology of inclusivity. The devotionals challenged us to identify who we consider less than ourselves. These are not easy truths to sit with. However, if we don't take the time to intentionally and regularly examine our heart, our hearts will grow hard.

Questions for reflection:

- What prejudices do you have that make you dismiss a person completely? (political perspective, views on Covid, parenting philosophy, socio-economic status, taste in music...)
- Are there certain behaviors, lifestyle choices, mindsets, sins that you believe should exclude someone from the Kingdom of God?
- How does it make you feel knowing they are welcome just as much as you are? Are you relieved or does it make you bristle?

**Prayer:** Invite God to examine your heart with eyes of faith that allow you to see those you encounter as deeply loved by God and bearing His image.

## Day 4

Yesterday, we looked at how Jesus included Gentiles in his ministry, even those who were considered particularly immoral. Jesus knew their sin, but more importantly, he knew their heart.

### Read Luke 19:1-10.

Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector. Not only did he serve in the most despised profession of the day, he was apparently very accomplished. The text also takes care to note that he was very wealthy. Tax collectors were well known for lining their pockets at the expense of the citizens, so we can imagine Zacchaeus was not popular in the neighborhood. Of all the people Jesus could choose to dine with, he chose to dine with Zacchaeus. The crowd is outraged! They didn't know what Jesus knew. Unexpected inclusivity lead to unexpected transformation. Again, Jesus looked beyond the external and responded to what he saw in the heart. More and more we are seeing who Jesus is and how He loves, and ultimately, how He expects us to love.

Gathering around the table for a meal was, in Jesus's time, an act of unity. In many ways, it still is today. Our culture recognizes that engaging in a shared meal is generally an invitation to deeper relationship. In Matthew 25, Jesus says "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." We have an opportunity to serve as an unlikely host to others and demonstrate Jesus' transforming love.

Questions for reflection:

Imagine you are planning a gathering around your dinner table...

- Who are the people you would include?
- Who are the people you would exclude? Recall some of the people who came to mind in yesterday's devotional. We all have people we would rather not break bread with.
  - Are they specific individuals?
  - Individuals who look different from you?
  - Families who are in a different income bracket than you?
  - People who vote differently from you?
  - Individuals with different lifestyles from you?
- Is there an individual or group that you go out of your way to avoid?

**Prayer:** Invite God to examine your heart and bring to mind someone you need to invite to your table. If your table feels full, pray for God to open a space for you to invite an unexpected guest and open yourself to deeper relationship.

**\*\*Note:** Don't be offended if you are suddenly bombarded with dinner invitations! It simply means that someone cares enough to step out of their comfort zone and invite you into deeper relationship.

## Day 5

### A Practice

This week we have gone from looking at washing our hands, to cleansing our hearts, to setting the table. Today we invite our honored guest.

More than once, the Gospel refers to the hardness of the disciple's hearts, their inability to acknowledge the truth. Clearly they were struggling to grasp the identity of Jesus and His mission. As we near the end the chapter, in Mark 8:29, Jesus poses a critical question to the disciples. He asked them "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah." This is a pivotal point in the Gospel.

Questions for reflection:

- At what point in your life did you recognize Jesus as the Messiah?
- If you're still making up your mind, what questions do you have about the character of Jesus?
- What characteristics of Jesus' identity do you struggle to accept?
- Who do *you* say Jesus is?
  - Write down some descriptive words.
- Are you ready to invite Him to your table?

Prayer:

- Invite God to open your heart and show you how to love like Jesus.
- Pray for Him to show you how you can exercise radical inclusivity in your sphere of influence.
- Acknowledge who Jesus is to you and say aloud the descriptive words and phrases that came to mind earlier.
- Repeat these words in worship and close with prayer of thanksgiving.