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RESOURCES FOR KINGDOM LIVING

SERIES: THERE HAS TO BE A BETTER WAY

By Danny Hall

On March 14, 1983 my understanding of God radically changed. That was the day our son was born. If you are a parent, then you remember that moment. There was all the chaos of getting to the hospital, all the things you had to pay attention to. You had so anticipated the moment that when it finally came and you got to hold that baby for the very first time, you were filled wonder and awe! Life changes in that moment, and it's a whole lot more than just sleepless nights and diapers. As a parent you're going to face many other issues through the years.

When that happened to me, my view of God changed, too. There is no more powerful picture of God given to us in Scripture than that of our Father. When I became a father, for the first time I began to get a tiny glimpse of what it meant for God to have a father's heart of love. There are wonderful attributes of God about which we speak objectively: his holiness, his love, his righteousness, his mercy. But our understanding of God, our experience of his attributes, comes through the grid of being his child.

We have come to a critical point in our study of the Sermon on the Mount. We're going to see

Jesus, once again, bring to the forefront this picture of God as our Father.

This sermon has challenged us in many ways. Jesus has led us on a journey of discovery of what it means to be the people of the kingdom of God. In the very first expression of this sermon, he told us that the people who are truly blessed are those who understand totally their own spiritual bankruptcy. We begin the journey of being kingdom people when we confront the reality that we have nothing to bring to God; we are absolutely dependent upon him. From that first statement, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," Jesus has built the teaching that we are going to have to radically follow him and obey him in every single area of our lives. Living as the people of God, we are a light to the world, so that people will see the power of God in how he is transforming us, both as individuals and as a community of faith. We stand out in order to draw people to the truth and the wonder of who God is. Jesus has called us to radically trust God with all that we are and all that we have; God will supply. We cannot pursue the things of this world. He has called us to be radically involved in each other's lives.

Thus Jesus has been building up what it means to be a kingdom person. In the passage we'll look at now, he is going to address the logical question that flows out of all he has taught us: how in the world can we ever live up to what he is calling us to be and do? If you read this sermon purely as marching orders, it's overwhelming. Jesus speaks directly to this point in Matthew 7:7-12:

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. Or what man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!

In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

The invitation

God calls to us as our loving heavenly Father: “Ask...seek...knock!” God asks us to trust enough in his loving Fatherhood to approach him and not hold back, but earnestly ask him for everything that we need.

James writes these words: “What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.” (James 4:1-3.) James echoes the idea behind Jesus’ call to us. It’s simply this: we have to focus on what matters, on God’s kingdom, ask God for what we need, and trust that God’s ways are right and his resources are sufficient.

Jesus also calls us to be persistent. Verse 7 is most literally translated, “*Keep on asking...keep on seeking...keep on knocking.*” There is an intensity to this form of the words. Look at the progression of the words: ask—to simply go to God and make a request; seek—a more intense word of pursuit; and knock—bang on the door! Both the form of the words and the progression of them picture us persistently pursuing God. Remember Jesus’ parable of the widow who keeps asking the unjust judge for help (Luke 18:1-8). God wants us to develop the habit of pursuing him with all our strength, so he invites us to come near, to keep on asking, to keep on seeking, to keep on knocking, because he is our loving Father who opens wide his arms to us.

There is a promise to this call.

The promise

“For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.” God rewards his children. He supplies for us everything we need. When we are hungering for answers, he shows us himself so that we can learn more of him. When we are troubled by what’s going on in our world and we don’t know how to cope with it, he gives us his strength. When he says, “Obey me,” and we wonder where the strength is going to come from, he says, “Just ask me, and I will give it to you.” He will answer our prayers. To everyone who comes to him, he hears and offers all of who he is, all of his resources to bring to bear on their situation, on their call, on their obedience to him.

One of my favorite stories in the Scriptures is the Old-Testament story of King Asa. Asa had become a great king but had somehow lost his focus on God. In 2 Chronicles 16:9 a prophet named Hanani said to him, “For the eyes of the LORD move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His.” God is looking for people whose hearts are completely his. That’s what the whole Sermon on the Mount is about—giving ourselves to King Jesus as the sovereign Lord of our lives. And when our hearts are completely his, God says, “I will show myself strongly on your behalf.”

Now, as much as God invites us into his presence, notice he does not leave our choice in this matter out of the equation. He doesn’t force this down our throats. He respects the dignity that he has built into us as human beings, created in his image. So he invites us to ask, to seek, to knock; for he knows that if we have a mindset of pursuing him, it will change us, deepen our faith, and give us a meaningful part in our own relationship with him. We’re not just puppets on God’s string; we are invited into a deep, powerful, intimate relationship.

All of this, however, is rooted in our understanding of the Father’s character. It only makes sense because of who God is. Jesus goes on to explain: “Or what man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will

give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he?” Jesus says that even sinful human beings understand the concept of parental love. No father is going to say, “I know you’re hungry son—here, have something to eat,” and hand him a rock, or a snake. We intuitively understand that the neglect or abuse of children is wrong. When it happens, it’s an aberration. How much more, then, should we be able to trust God as our Father! If a father would naturally take care of his child, surely God is much more trustworthy to supply all that we need.

There are aspects of God’s character that draw us to have confidence in him. There are two big categories that theologians like to separate out about God’s character: his transcendence and his imminence. God’s transcendence means he is the sovereign Lord of the universe. He is above all else, the controller and creator. This means that he knows everything you need and has the ability to supply it.

God’s imminence is his nearness to us. The sovereign Lord of the universe, its creator and sustainer, loves each one of us and invites us into his presence! This means he wants to supply all we need.

Notice where Jesus goes with this in verse 12.

The challenge

With the Father’s call for us to seek him based on his wonderful character, on the reality that he can and will supply all that we need, Jesus then says, “In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this [sums up] the Law and the Prophets.” Later in the book of Matthew Jesus will say, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 22:37-40; see also Mark 12:30-31.)

Jesus is saying here, “Draw upon the strength of the Father, and when you do that you will be free to love other people.” The wonderful thing that happens when we place our faith in God is that we are no longer bound to demand that others meet our needs. We are no longer bound to worry about what response others will have to us. We are set free by God’s sustaining power and his intimate, wonderful love for us to love others unconditionally and freely, with our whole hearts. The so-called Golden Rule, which is often quoted from this context, takes on a whole new meaning when we understand that our hearts are set free by God’s sustaining presence and power in our lives and his love for us. Then we are free to be lovers of others, to do for others what we wish them to do for us. We can take risks and love extravagantly and unconditionally, so that we touch others’ lives.

This is Jesus’ wonderful call and his challenge to us. We can’t do it in our own strength, but we have a Father who says, “Seek me, ask me, knock, petition me; I will give you everything you need.” We are therefore able *in his strength* to be who he calls us to be.

Instead of illustrating this with stories, I invited folks to share testimonies of how God has shown himself strong on their behalf. Through their stories we can learn how God can sustain and help us when we draw near to him.

Testimonies

Elaine:

“This message spoke directly to me, because since May of 2001 I have been unemployed. For about a year and a half after that, God used unemployment insurance to keep me going, and then that stopped. Not only did I lose that financial backing, I lost my room and pretty much everything except my car, which God has allowed me to live in since then. But during the last year and a half God has used so many people, through the need fund and individuals in this body, to supply my needs. That doesn’t mean that I ate three times a day, but God supplied. There were days when I went hungry, but God taught me how to trust him rather than listen to my stomach all

day long. I've had jobs that lasted a few days, a month, or whatever, and God used those times as well.

“But I've learned very much that God is very near. My relationship with God during this time has gotten stronger and greater. I trust him more than I ever have before. I'm still homeless, but a week ago Friday I had an interview, and within an hour I had a job. This is a contract job. It's supposed to last six months; however, I'm praying that God will allow it to last longer. God is indeed in the business of being transcendent and imminent. There was a time when I thought, ‘That's for other people, but will God do it for me?’ I found out that yes, he will.”

Sally:

“For the last fifteen years I've been on a missionary track. I spent twelve years in West Africa. I was a successful missionary, doing all the right things, but somewhere along the line I lost my heart for the Lord. I lost my contact with him. God allowed me that experience of drifting away, but he didn't let go of me. And I cried out to him, asking, Where are you? Where are you? Why does Christian life work for everybody else but me? Here I am helping other people to know you and doing a project as a missionary, and I've lost contact with you.’ It was a long time of crying, but he was gracious and he answered me. I urge you, cry out everything that's in your heart, even the anger that may be stored up there. He can take all of that. He probably wants to prove himself real to you in a new way, as he did for me. I pray that will happen for you, that every little dark corner in your life will be cleansed by the Lord's new, refreshing grace. I praise him.”

Byron:

“I've had a couple of exceptional, tangible experiences of answered prayer. The first one was that God removed the desire to drink from my life. I'm an alcoholic. I have no power at all over alcohol. The first time I got drunk, I wound up naked by a river being chased by a two-hundred-pound man. It went downhill from there. There was just insanity in my life. But God removed the desire to drink just like that, overnight! I couldn't stop myself, but all of a sudden, as if by magic, I didn't care about drinking anymore. I will never, ever again touch alcohol. I have too much respect and gratitude for that gift.

“The other experience was, a couple of years ago I was in the hospital for brain surgery to remove a tumor the size of a baseball from my head. I was plunged into a coma, and the doctors thought I had five minutes to live. But thank God my family was there, and thank God that I had my faith in prayer before I went into the surgery. After five months I woke up. All of the doctors called me Miracle Boy, which was nice to hear, because I believe in miracles and divine intervention. I'm here to tell you that it works!”

Jim:

“Our oldest son Tim, his wife Rosalyn, and their twelve-year-old son Clayton live in the West Palm Beach area of Florida. This has been a big concern the last few days [because of a hurricane]. We've been in contact with them, praying for them. Our son boarded up the house with screws through the plywood, fastened down everything he could think of, and all through last night we were thinking about them and praying for them as the storm hit. Well, this morning we called and the phone worked. They're there, and everything is okay, praise God! They were scared to death, but God spared their lives. We thank God for that today. That's just the latest thing in our lives.”

Irv:

“I had an incredible experience. My uncle Paul in Pennsylvania, who is almost ninety-two years old, has been a tough-talking guy most of his life. I tried to witness to him a couple of years ago, but I never seemed to get anywhere. His wife, who is eighty-six years old, just had a stroke. When I talked to him on the phone the other day, he was telling me, ‘I got up to have breakfast, looked across the table, and nobody was there.’ He was really hurting because his wife wasn't with him. I told him Scripture says that when you get married, ‘the two

shall become one.’ He said, ‘I believe that.’ He said when he was visiting his wife the day before in the hospital, he told her, ‘I love you.’ She said, ‘How come you never told me that before?’ The Holy Spirit just moved me, and I asked him, ‘Paul, would you like to receive Jesus Christ?’ He said, ‘Yes.’ That totally caught me off-guard. *Now what do I do!* But I led him in the sinner’s prayer, that he repent of his sins and ask Jesus Christ to come into his life, and he did that. It just blew me away. So my prayer now is that somebody will come alongside him, because none of my relatives are born again, and that the Lord would surround him with his holy angels and protect him.”

Most of these stories are just about normal life. We all live in the ebb and flow of life, facing the same kinds of struggles, although they may manifest themselves differently. God has indeed showed himself to be strong in these stories. Sometimes we think that trusting God is about big events or crises or even some unusual opportunity. In reality, our greatest challenge is often to trust him in the normal course of life, believing that he is at work and using us day by day. May we learn to walk with that kind of faith.

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